

Towards Māori Wellbeing Economies

This Aropū paper, part of Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga's Te Arotahi policy paper series, is a short impact brief summarising the main insights from *Te Ahunga atu ki ngā Ōhanga Oranga Māori: Towards Māori Wellbeing Economies*, a book by Professor Chellie Spiller and colleagues (Spiller, 2025). Their research examines whānau-centred approaches to inclusive and sustainable prosperity. These findings foreground Māori wellbeing economies that are place-based, whakapapa-anchored, and oriented to intergenerational wellbeing.

Te ōhanga Māori | The Māori economy

Since 2010, much effort has gone into measuring the size, composition and contribution of te ōhanga Māori, also known as the Māori economy (Nana, 2011; Nana 2015; Nana, 2021; Schulze, 2024). In 2023, the Māori economic contribution to the New Zealand economy was estimated at \$32 billion (8.9 per cent of GDP), which was nearly double its value in 2018 (\$17 billion) (Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment, n.d.). With a fast-growing and diversifying Māori asset base (up from \$69 billion in 2018 to \$126 billion in 2023), there is a great deal of interest in the success stories of post-settlement governance entities, Māori trusts, exporters and entrepreneurs. The core interest of this research is how whānau participate in, shape and benefit from te ōhanga Māori, locally, relationally and over generations. What pathways enable whānau to grow livelihoods and intergenerational wellbeing, given well-documented distributional inequities? The latest research published by Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga titled *Towards Māori Wellbeing Economies* addresses these questions, combining qualitative research with whānau, whānau business

case studies, and an analysis of wellbeing economy theories and models. The research offers practical steps for strengthening whānau connections and building capacities for mana motuhake and intergenerational flourishing through locally led, place-based enterprise. It centres the relational economy, whānau, whenua, awa and moana, as the foundation of prosperity.

What are whānau-centred Māori wellbeing economies?

The research identified a number of guiding principles at the heart of whānau-centred Māori wellbeing economies, which are relational and locally led, and have intergenerational intent. The principles are presented as adaptive, place-based pathways derived from empirical insights and applied theoretical analysis. They include:

Ko te whānau te pokapū: The whānau is the core economic and social unit — not the individual. Decisions are made together. Resources are shared. Wellbeing is **collective**.

Ehara i te mea kua mau ki te onamata: The traditional Māori economy is flexible and **adaptive** — it changes with time, place and need. This adaptability is key to building future Māori economies of wellbeing.

Te raranga hononga whakapapa, hononga kaupapa hoki: Māori economies are largely **decentralised**, and are networks rather than hierarchies. People collaborate based on shared kinship, values, purpose and goals. These networks are flexible and adaptive to change. They facilitate flows of information, material, support and aroha, and in so doing, grow collective wellbeing. These values, alongside others cited in the report, can be found in business internationally.

Culture matters

Extensive international research shows that it is communities with strong levels of self-determination and ‘cultural match’ who succeed in economic development (Cornell and Kalt, 2006).

- *Self-determination* refers to the capacity of a community to govern itself and make autonomous decisions regarding its social, economic and political affairs.
- *Cultural match* refers to the alignment of development initiatives with the cultural values, norms and institutions of whānau, hapū, iwi and local institutions.

Communities who are strong in these areas surpass those who are not, even if those ‘weaker’ communities have good natural resources, high rates of educational attainment and good access to economic development opportunities. This alignment strengthens locally rooted capability and intergenerational outcomes.

Prior research shows that meeting **whānau needs and responsibilities to whenua and community** is an important reason for the formation and growth aspirations of Māori enterprise (BDO New Zealand, 2024). The Māori business owners included in the study provided powerful examples of the importance of cultural match. Values such as whanaungatanga and manaakitanga were embedded into all aspects of their business practice and were critical factors in their success.

Case study: North Drill

In 2015, Māori business owners Ida and Bronsen Murray bought North Drill and its contract with the local electricity lines company. They initially worked from their garage with just five employees. In 2025, North Drill employs nearly 50 people. Expansion was achieved by networking with others successful in aspects of business they wished to develop. Alongside drilling, North Drill now provides infrastructure services, drainage and water boring. It is partnering with North Power in building a solar farm, which could catalyse the company’s national expansion. It has also expanded into a second business, which builds prefabricated cabins and houses. This tuākana-tēina approach builds a skilled local workforce, expanding opportunities for rangatahi, and strengthening intergenerational prosperity in the region.

The business operates as a whānau: hiring on employee recommendation, setting expectations based on whānau needs (health and safety, performance and personal development), and reinforcing the culture of whānau enterprise. Employees are supported to work on investing in their long-term prospects. Experienced workers act as tuākana, mentoring and training new workers. In 2023, North Drill won the Northland ACC Health and Safety Workplace Award.

Case study: Stronghold Group

Stronghold Group (Stronghold) is a Māori and Pasifika-owned construction and project management company based in Tāmaki Makaurau. **Its practice emphasises local employment, trusted procurement relationships and on-the-job learning.** Founded in 2020 by Quincy (Cook Island, Niue) and Karalee Tangiau (Ngāti Whātua o Kaipara), the company prioritises the wellbeing of its employees and whānau through a comprehensive support system. Deeply influenced by kaupapa Māori values such as aroha, manaakitanga and whanaungatanga, Stronghold aims to create a supportive and resilient workplace that appreciates cultural identities. The company offers services ranging from residential to commercial and industrial projects, meeting clients’ diverse needs. Driven by a strong sense of social



responsibility, Stronghold delivers high-quality construction and project management solutions while preserving cultural sensitivity, community engagement and environmental sustainability.

Policy actions

The common adage ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’ fails to acknowledge that not all boats are equal. **Iwi asset growth is significant, but benefits are uneven; closing gaps requires locally led, whānau-centred pathways that strengthen relational and place-based economies.**

Our research identified six actions to empower whānau-centred economies of wellbeing:

1. **Identify whānau who are successfully growing wellbeing** and build networks around them. Encourage and promote those who generate meaningful, sustainable incomes that enable healthy, thriving intergenerational whenua, awa and moana.
2. **Invest in adaptive, context-specific whānau networks** that promote localised solutions, flax-roots leadership and local circular economies.
3. **Back whānau networks** with polycentric, participatory governance that upholds rangatiratanga, with cohesive oversight and iterative refinement.
4. **Strengthen wellbeing and equity** through inclusive support systems. Partner with employers to create secure, kaupapa-aligned, community-focused work opportunities, **including paid training and care-support arrangements.** Provide leadership development that starts with Māori values.
5. **Acknowledge the wealth gap** between Māori and European New Zealanders and the way it undermines national wellbeing across multiple domains. **Addressing the wealth gap requires repairing relational, place-based capabilities as well as financial inequality.**
6. **Expand the definition of economy** to include cultural, **care, environmental restoration, and non-market contributions** to better encompass Māori contributions.

References

- BDO New Zealand. (2024). *BDO Māori Business Sector Report 2024: Kaha Ake Tātou Kotahi – Stronger Together*. <https://www.bdo.nz/en-nz/microsites/bdo-maori-business-sector-report-2024>
- Cornell, S., & Kalt, J. (2006). Two approaches to economic development on American Indian reservations: One works, the other doesn't. In M. Jorgensen & S. Cornell (Eds.), *Resources for nation building: Governance, development and the future of American Indian nations. The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development and the Native Nations Institute for Leadership, Management, and Policy*. https://nngovernance.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/2022-09/2005_CORNELL_kalt_JOPNA_twoapproaches.pdf
- Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment. (n.d.). *Te Ōhanga Māori – The Māori economy reports*. <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/business-and-employment/economic-growth/te-ohanga-maori-the-maori-economy/te-ohanga-maori-the-maori-economy-reports>
- Nana, G., Khan, M., & Schulze, H. (2015). *Te Ōhanga Māori 2013: Māori economy report 2013*. Te Puni Kōkiri. https://ndhadeliver.natlib.govt.nz/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE25266643
- Nana, G., Reid, A., Schulze, H., Dixon, H., Green, S., & Riley, H. (2021). *Te Ōhanga Māori 2018: The Māori economy 2018*. Reserve Bank of New Zealand and BERL. <https://berl.co.nz/sites/default/files/2021-01/Te%20%C5%8Changa%20M%C4%81ori%202018.pdf>
- Nana, G., Stokes, F., & Molano, W. (2011). *The asset base, income, expenditure and GDP of the 2010 Māori economy* (A report prepared by BERL for the Māori Economic Taskforce). Te Puni Kōkiri. https://ndhadeliver.natlib.govt.nz/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE34285740
- Schulze, H., Reid, A., Dixon, H., McIndoe, C., & Wiradika, S. (2024). *Te Ōhanga Māori 2023: The Māori economy 2023*. Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment. <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/assets/te-ohanga-maori-2023-report.pdf>
- Spiller, C., Rout, M., Haar, J., Mika, J., Reid, J., Karamaina, T., & Niu, X. (2025). *Te Ahunga atu ki ngā Ōhanga Oranga Māori: Towards Māori economies of wellbeing. Ngā whānau i te pokapū o te oranga*. The University of Waikato in partnership with Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga. <https://maorieconomy.co.nz/>

How to cite this paper

Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga. (2025, December). *Towards Māori wellbeing economies* (Te Arotahi Series – Aropū Paper, No. 9). Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga, New Zealand's Māori Centre of Research Excellence. <https://doi.org/10.20507/tearotahi.aropu.2025.009>

Contact: Chellie Spiller (Ngāti Kahungunu)
Professor of Management and Leadership,
University of Waikato, chellie.spiller@waikato.ac.nz



ABOUT NGĀ PAE O TE MĀRAMATANGA

Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga (NPM) is Aotearoa New Zealand's Māori Centre of Research Excellence (CoRE). Funded by the Tertiary Education Commission and hosted by Waipapa Taumata Rau | The University of Auckland, NPM has 21 partner research entities and a national network of Māori researchers spanning all major disciplinary fields.

NPM research is driven by a vision of creating the foundations for flourishing Māori futures and bringing about transformative change for our communities, our environs and Aotearoa. NPM is an important vehicle by which Aotearoa continues to be a key player in global Indigenous research and affairs.

ABOUT THE AROPŪ PAPERS

Aropū papers are short impact briefs within Te Arotahi, Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga's policy paper series, summarising key findings and outcomes from NPM research. They provide concise, actionable insights to inform law, policy, and practice.

Te Arotahi paper series includes three publication types:

- Arotahi** – Substantive research reports focused on a single kaupapa
- Aropū** – Short impact briefs summarising key findings and outcomes
- Arowhānuī** – Evidence syntheses drawing from multiple NPM projects

All papers are freely available and designed to share policy-relevant, Māori-researched solutions. www.maramatanga.ac.nz/research/arotahi-papers

ISSN: 2624-4462 (Print) | ISSN: 2624-4470 (Online) | DOI 10.20507/tearotahi.aropu.2025.009
Copyright © 2025 Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga, hosted by the University of Auckland | Waipapa Taumata Rau



www.maramatanga.ac.nz