

Reflections Report on the Digital Equity Participatory Funding Distribution Model

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1. Executive Summary

This report offers reflections on the learnings and insights gained through the digital equity participatory funding distribution model in Tairāwhiti. The initiative has brought together key community organisations, each committed to advancing digital equity through collaborative action. As this community-led model unfolds, we recognise the challenges of fostering collaborative processes in environments shaped by historical competition, resource scarcity, and external economic pressures. The following insights provide a comprehensive view of the dynamics at play, underscoring the need for an adaptable, resilient approach that values relationship-building, trust, and the alignment of long-term strategic goals with local needs.

2. Background and Objectives

The primary objectives of this project include creating a coordinated network of digital equity stakeholders, enabling community-led funding decisions, and fostering new approaches to digital challenges. The project's goals reflect a desire to achieve both immediate and sustained impact, balancing the short-term needs of organisations with longer-term strategic aims. This dual focus has required continual adaptation to both internal and external challenges, a theme that pervades the insights discussed in this report.

3. Key Insights

A. Community Collaboration Requires Intentional Investment of Time and Space

Community collaboration is inherently complex and often slow to produce visible outcomes, as it depends on building interpersonal trust and mutual understanding. While such processes do not yield immediate productivity metrics, they establish a foundation upon which sustainable initiatives can flourish. For Tairāwhiti, the early focus on relationship-building has allowed each organisation to contribute openly, fostering an atmosphere that values collective goals over individual successes.

In a traditional funding model, there is often pressure to demonstrate “value for money” quickly; however, this model has emphasised creating “soft infrastructure” before measurable outcomes. This underscores the importance of not only funding outputs but also valuing the intangible process of community strengthening—a critical insight for any organisation seeking long-term impact in community-led initiatives.

B. Overcoming Competitive Dynamics in Resource-Scarce Environments

Collaboration is challenging in an ecosystem shaped by limited resources, where organisations are often pitted against each other for survival. The Tairāwhiti initiative has grappled with the tension between fostering a collaborative ethos and operating within a competitive framework that traditionally prioritises individual outcomes. Moving toward a collaborative model in such an environment requires reorienting participants' perspectives on resource sharing and collective benefit.

In an atmosphere of scarcity, the transition to cooperative practice requires participants to redefine success and adopt a shared vision of impact. This transition reflects the need for structural support that acknowledges both the resilience of individual organisations and the collective power of a unified approach. Here, the shift from individual survival to collective achievement represents not just a strategic pivot but a cultural one, affecting how organisations perceive and pursue community goals.

C. Engaging Key Leaders as Early Champions for the Initiative

Within any ecosystem, certain individuals hold influential positions and have established networks that can significantly accelerate or impede progress. Engaging these leaders early has been essential in galvanising support and creating momentum for Tairāwhiti's initiative. Their endorsement serves as a signal to others within the community, helping to create legitimacy and encouraging others to engage actively.

However, the process of engaging these key figures is not instantaneous. Building a coalition of committed leaders involves aligning their unique perspectives and, at times, mediating differing priorities. The presence of these leaders lends credibility and consistency to the initiative, but their involvement requires ongoing engagement and a nuanced understanding of how best to integrate their contributions without overshadowing the collective ethos of the project.

D. Emphasising Adaptable, Emergent Project Design

The flexibility of an emergent project design has been a fundamental aspect of this initiative's progress. Unlike more prescriptive models, an emergent approach accommodates real-time shifts based on community needs, allowing the project to pivot away from originally envisioned design sprints toward relationship-building when required. This flexibility has allowed the initiative to remain responsive to local conditions and challenges, such as changes in community leadership or unforeseen regional events.

This insight highlights the importance of valuing responsiveness as a core competency in community-led projects. Rather than perceiving deviation from the original plan as a failure, this model interprets adaptation as necessary for sustaining alignment with community needs. Such responsiveness requires a mindset shift for all stakeholders, where success is not defined by adherence to initial plans but by the project's ability to stay relevant and effective over time.

E. Balancing Long-Term Strategic Vision with Immediate Operational Needs

A key challenge in Tairāwhiti has been reconciling the immediate operational demands of each organisation with the long-term strategic vision of the project. While collaborative activities are essential for future success, the immediate realities of funding cuts, resource constraints, and economic pressures have necessitated a pragmatic approach that also addresses short-term survival.

This tension illustrates the dual nature of community-led initiatives, which must support both “keeping the lights on” for participating organisations and building the groundwork for larger, more strategic goals. It reveals the need for a holistic understanding of sustainability that encompasses both immediate stability and future potential. Striking this balance requires continual negotiation and a recognition that the organisations’ operational viability directly impacts their ability to contribute to the collaborative process.

F. Building High-Trust, Transparent Relationships with Funders

A cornerstone of the Tairāwhiti initiative has been its relationship with Internet NZ, characterised by high levels of trust and transparency. This openness has allowed for a dynamic, iterative process that can respond to challenges without compromising the integrity of the project. Unlike more rigid funder-recipient relationships, this high-trust approach has encouraged candid feedback, allowing both parties to learn and adapt collaboratively.

This insight underscores the value of funders who view their role as partners rather than overseers. The trust placed by Internet NZ has facilitated a fluid working relationship where the community can explore unconventional solutions without fear of reprimand for deviating from the initial plan. Such funder relationships empower community-driven projects, underscoring that genuine partnership is integral to meaningful and lasting impact.

G. Promoting Resilience through “Soft Infrastructure” Development

Building collaborative resilience has required investment in what might traditionally be seen as intangible assets, such as trust, relationships, and shared values. In the Tairāwhiti project, this “soft infrastructure” has proven as essential as any material resource. While these elements may not be immediately quantifiable, they provide the foundation upon which more tangible successes are built.

Developing soft infrastructure shifts the focus from quick wins to enduring impact, highlighting the necessity of valuing process over product in community-led initiatives. This insight reflects a paradigm where relationships and trust-building are seen as assets in their own right, necessary for building a sustainable and cohesive network. It suggests that lasting impact in community work depends as much on relational integrity as on programmatic success.

H. Creating Pathways for Continual Learning and Growth within the Collaborative Model

The ongoing nature of learning has been another important insight from the Tairāwhiti initiative. By embedding reflective processes, the project has encouraged participants to continually reassess and refine their roles and strategies. This emphasis on learning is essential in a model that must respond to dynamic community needs and a shifting resource landscape.

This approach elevates learning as a key component of the project's resilience, recognising that adaptation and growth are signs of a healthy collaboration. It reflects an understanding that sustained success in a collaborative model depends on its participants' ability to evolve, both individually and collectively. In practice, this has meant embracing trial and error as part of the process, viewing missteps as opportunities for reflection rather than setbacks.

I. Recognising the Emotional and Personal Investment Required in Community Collaboration

An often-overlooked aspect of community-led initiatives is the emotional and personal investment required from participants. In Tairāwhiti, leaders have navigated personal, professional, and community challenges while also striving to foster digital equity. The project's progress has depended on the resilience and commitment of these individuals, underscoring the deeply personal nature of community collaboration.

This insight highlights the need for understanding and supporting the human elements of collaboration, recognising that burnout and disengagement are risks when individuals are asked to shoulder significant emotional and operational burdens. Acknowledging this emotional labour is essential for maintaining a healthy collaborative environment, where participants feel supported and valued not only for their skills but also for their dedication to the community.

4. Conclusion

The Tairāwhiti digital equity initiative has highlighted critical insights into the complexities of community-led collaboration. These insights underscore the importance of an adaptable approach, valuing process over product, and fostering relationships built on trust and mutual understanding. The project's challenges and successes alike reveal that sustainable impact in digital equity—and broader community work—depends on resilience, adaptability, and a deep commitment to collaborative values. As this initiative continues, these insights will guide ongoing work and inform future projects, setting a model for how funders and communities can create lasting change together.