

# Deepening the Kaupapa: Evolving Reflections from the Tairāwhiti Digital Equity Project (2025)

## Introduction

This reflection builds on previous insights from the Tairāwhiti Digital Equity Project, capturing the evolution of thinking, relationships, and outcomes as the kaupapa matures. What began as a community-led response to digital exclusion has deepened into a living ecosystem - anchored in kaupapa Māori, fuelled by relational infrastructure, and oriented toward long-term systems change. The following themes offer a snapshot of where we are now, drawing from both strategic shifts and on-the-ground experience. These reflections are less about outcomes and more about the values, tensions, and transformations shaping the journey.

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## 1. Digital Equity is No Longer Optional—It’s Foundational

Our early focus was on addressing access gaps: networks, infrastructure, and skills. But as the mahi unfolded, digital equity revealed itself as much more than a technical issue. It is now clearly a foundational condition for equitable participation in society—across education, healthcare, economic development, whānau connection, employment, creative expression, and civic life. It’s not a tech issue; it’s a justice issue.

Digital equity is not a niche concern; it is a gateway. It intersects with identity, belonging, and opportunity. We’ve seen firsthand how digital exclusion compounds other forms of marginalisation. From rural connectivity on the Coast to kaumatua struggling to access finance and healthcare, we have seen that without digital equity, entire communities risk exclusion from the future.

This realisation has reshaped our priorities. We are no longer asking how to “plug the gap”—we are asking how to rewire the system so that equity, access, and opportunity are designed in from the start.

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## **2. Whanaungatanga as Infrastructure**

If digital tools are the hardware of equity, then relationships are the software that makes everything work. The strongest and most enduring shifts in this project have emerged from our relational infrastructure, from the strength of whanaungatanga and our ability to stay connected through change. Early partnerships based on goodwill have matured into a more intentional network of trust, reciprocity, and collective commitment. These aren't just collaborators, they're co-conspirators.

These relationships didn't form by chance. They were built intentionally through wānanga, road trips, kai, late-night kōrero, Slack channels, shared commitments, and collective dreaming. Over time, those connections have moved beyond transaction into trust, and from coordination into collective identity.

We have come to understand that investing in ecosystem builders, network weavers, and relationship-holders is not a luxury, it is core infrastructure. The next phase of this kaupapa must continue to invest deliberately in these "invisible threads" that make collective action possible.

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## **3. Unexpected Outcomes: Emergence in the Margins**

While we have a clear direction, many of our biggest breakthroughs have come from the unplanned, the informal, the emergent. Some of the most powerful shifts happened not in strategy sessions, but in the back seats of cars, over kai at the hui, and the spontaneous pivots that arose from community insight. While a clear roadmap and strategy are essential for guiding our efforts and achieving digital equity outcomes, it's equally crucial not to over-engineer every step. Too much rigidity can stifle the very opportunities that lead to transformative, serendipitous outcomes.

This taught us a critical lesson: while structure gives us scaffolding, emergence gives us life. We need both.

By allowing space for experimentation and flexibility, we've uncovered community leaders, sparked intergenerational connection, and activated energy we didn't know was there. Many of our successes came from trusting people and the process—even when outcomes were not yet clear. This balance of strategy and spontaneity will continue to be key as we scale.

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## **4. Empowerment Over Performance: Shifting Mindsets in Community and Funding Approaches**

We've seen how rigid funding expectations can inhibit true innovation. When community organisations are locked into performance-driven models, they become overly focused on deliverables and reporting, often at the expense of responsiveness, trust, and local relevance.

What's needed instead is a shift: from performance to empowerment. From compliance to creativity. When communities are trusted to hold the kaupapa, they respond with care, integrity, and accountability, because it is theirs.

Importantly, this also means allowing for missteps and learning. Communities will not always get it right. But that doesn't mean the trust was misplaced. It means the system needs to be built for growth, iteration, and regeneration. Funders must be willing to back communities over the long haul, not just for the lifespan of a contract.

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## **5. Systemic Gaps: The Limits of Resilience and the Need for Structural Commitment**

A consistent theme is the silence—or at times retreat—of systemic actors. As the community stepped up, many system actors stepped back. Funding for digital inclusion has been cut or deprioritised. Promising regional strategies have stalled. High-level investments tend to favour scalable, commercially attractive tech solutions, while grassroots innovation is often left unfunded and unsupported.

We've held the line. Not because it was easy, but because it mattered. But our resilience is not an endless resource. There is a very real risk that institutional actors are becoming comfortable with community picking up the slack.

We've done what we can with what we have. But this has revealed a dangerous dynamic: the romanticisation of community resilience as a substitute for systemic responsibility. Resilience is not inexhaustible. Communities are not a backup plan. They are equal partners in this work, and they need to be resourced, respected, and represented as such.

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## **6. Participatory Investment Models: Funding with the Community, Not Just For It**

One of the clearest opportunities for the future is the development of a participatory investment model — an approach where decisions about digital equity funding are made by the people most affected by inequity. This goes beyond consultation. It means co-governance, shared decision-making, and community-led design.

The success of our digital equity innovation challenge — where 11 projects were funded, mentored, and brought into a collective learning environment — demonstrates that community knows how to lead when given the resources and the trust.

A participatory model would allow for funding decisions that are relational, responsive, and values-aligned. It would move us beyond fragmented pilots toward a coordinated ecosystem of impact. But to do this, we must redesign the architecture of funding itself—not just the delivery.

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## 7. Looking Forward: Deepening the Roots, Elevating the System

As we look to the future, our priorities are clear:

- **Embed a community-led, participatory investment model** that builds collective ownership and reduces competitive scarcity.
- **Strengthen ecosystem infrastructure** by investing in connectors, conveners, and community tech champions.
- **Grow strategic alliances** with iwi, marae, kura, tech partners, and national influencers to scale impact beyond the region.
- **Develop a long-term digital equity strategy** grounded in kaupapa Māori, with measurable wellbeing outcomes and sustained resourcing.
- **Shift the system** by challenging policy assumptions, advocating for equity-focused investment, and holding institutional actors to account.

Most importantly, we move forward grounded in the knowledge that complexity is not a sign of failure—it's a sign that we're working at the right level. We no longer seek to control every variable. Instead, we trust the ecosystem. We lean into relationships. We hold space for the unpredictable. And we stay close to our values.

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## Closing Reflections

As we reflect on the past year and a half of partnership, community mobilisation, and the journey with Internet New Zealand, we see a tapestry of progress, learning, and growth. There have been ups and downs, moments of bold ambition, and times of careful recalibration.

Through it all, we have taken strong first steps toward a more equitable digital future for Te Tairāwhiti, but we know that many steps remain.

Our journey has taught us the value of leaning into discomfort, embracing the unknown, and continuously pushing the edges of what's possible. As we move forward, we remain committed to deepening our impact, strengthening our relationships, and building a digital equity ecosystem that is truly inclusive and transformative.

Our kaupapa is clear: we do not wait for the system to catch up. We build the system we want to see. And we do it together.