

Effective community-level change: What makes community-level initiatives effective and how can central government best support them?

RESEARCH SUMMARY

DECEMBER 2015

Background

This research summary highlights the key findings of the research report *“Effective Community-level change: What makes community-level initiatives effective and how can government best support them?”*¹. The Ministry of Social Development (MSD) and Superu commissioned Quigley and Watts Ltd to complete the research.

The purpose of the research was to draw together existing evidence to provide insights about what works and how government can best support communities. The research focused on community-level initiatives that were relevant to MSD’s outcomes in its Statement of Intent 2014–2018.

KEY FINDINGS

- › The majority of community level initiatives are not formally evaluated and when they are most rely on qualitative case studies. Case studies are useful for understanding how initiatives were implemented and describing the changes that occurred. However, case studies alone are not sufficient to say these changes led to an improvement in a community’s outcomes.
 - › There is considerable existing knowledge about how government can best support successful community-level initiatives. What appears to be lacking are mechanisms for disseminating that learning and putting it into practice.
 - › To create effective change communities need to want to change and have leaders who are trusted and supported. Communities that are not ready will need more intensive capacity building up front so that the community can be an effective partner.
 - › A common success factor was the importance of a shared vision, where the community lead in identifying the issues to address, the outcomes they want to achieve and the process for getting there.
- › Government agencies need to be clear about whether they are purchasing services that they wish to fully specify, or are contributing to community-level initiatives.
 - › There needs to be an on-going focus on building the capacity of the funder and the community. For government this may mean establishing roles and processes to facilitate collaborative cross-sector work at the local level. In communities this can include training, mentors and technical support.
 - › Communities can be burdened with costly processes for applying for funding. Application and accountability requirements need to be as simple as possible and in-step with the amount of funding provided. Initiatives aimed at streamlining funding processes across government could also help.
 - › There can be a tension between the political pressure for ‘quick wins’ and the need for longer timeframes for community-level initiatives.

¹ A literature scan was also conducted to review definitions of community development, understand the New Zealand context and identify evaluations of community-level initiatives. See www.superu.govt.nz/effective_community_level_change

What makes community level change effective and how can government help?

Community-level initiatives have been widely implemented in New Zealand and overseas. However, there is a lack of robust quantitative evidence on whether community-level initiatives are effective in achieving their outcomes. This makes it difficult to assess how government can be effective in supporting communities.

The majority of community level initiatives are not formally evaluated and when they are evaluated most rely on qualitative case studies. Evidence from case studies is useful in understanding how initiatives were implemented and what changes they created, including community development. However, evidence from case studies alone is not sufficient to say that changes in a community lead to a change in their outcomes.

The majority of community level initiatives are not formally evaluated and when they are evaluated most rely on qualitative case studies

Success factors and barriers

The report identifies a number of success factors and barriers associated with community-level initiatives. The case studies reviewed demonstrate the importance of developing a genuine partnership between the funder and the community and the challenges of devolving decision-making to the local level.

A common success factor across the case studies was the importance of a shared vision, where the community lead in identifying the issues to address, the outcomes they want to achieve and the process for getting there. Creating a shared vision needs communities to be ready, the community wants to change and leaders are trusted and supported. Local leaders can benefit from training, coaching and mentoring.

The need for funders to be accountable means that sometimes communities can be burdened with costly processes for applying for funding and a high level of reporting when they do get funding.

Success factors for community-level initiatives

- > A shared vision, owned by the community and where communities participate in the design and implementation of initiatives.
- > The community is ready to change.
- > Strong leadership that is trusted, skilled and supported.
- > Outcomes are identified and it is clear what changes are needed to achieve them.
- > Adaptable funding arrangements are needed because initiatives can take time to design and implement.
- > Power imbalances must be managed, especially when working with minority groups.

Barriers to success

- > Loss of momentum from volunteers that burn out and are not replaced.
- > Poor relationship with the community, particularly important for Māori and Pacific communities
- > High compliance costs of applying for funding and reporting on how the funding is being spent
- > There can be a tension between the political pressure for 'quick wins' and the need for longer timeframes for community-level initiatives.



How can central government best support community-level initiatives?

Multiple reports and reviews over the past 15 years from New Zealand and overseas have provided advice to central government about the best ways to support community-level initiatives. There is often confusion about the purpose of government funding to communities. Government agencies need to be clear about whether they are purchasing services that they wish to fully specify, or are contributing to community-level initiatives.

There is considerable existing knowledge about how government can best support successful community-level initiatives. What appears to be lacking are mechanisms for disseminating that learning and putting it into practice.

Compliance and regulatory barriers

Government regulations and funding arrangements can work against the ability of communities to develop and transform themselves. For example, funding and procurement processes can impede community progress towards achieving their outcomes.

Application and accountability requirements need to be as simple as possible and in-step with the amount of funding provided. Initiatives aimed at streamlining funding process across government may also help.

Collaboration

Successful collaboration between communities and central government (and between government agencies) is most evident at the local level, where the public-sector is often a key enabler of successful community-level initiatives. Central government can support collaboration at the project level by:

- > mandating collaboration
- > recognising the time and resources required and funding appropriately
- > encouraging government agencies at the local and regional level to support the initiative and work together.

For collaboration to work the community and government need to enhance their capacity to work together and deliver. For government this may mean establishing roles and processes to facilitate collaborative cross-sector work at the local level. In communities this can include training, mentoring, and technical support. The Māori and Pacific Education Initiative² is an example of how a funder can adapt its culture and processes to better support Māori and Pacific communities.

Creating a supportive environment for communities

- > Improve coordination across central and local government agencies when working with communities.
- > Invest in community organisations and their infrastructure.
- > Share good practice knowledge and experience of working with communities.
- > Focus funding on community-level initiatives that support national objectives.
- > Minimise the impact of national-level social and economic policies on the capacity of communities to develop and sustain local initiatives.

For collaboration to work the community and government need to enhance their capacity to work together and deliver

² Māori and Pacific Education Initiative, & Hancock, F. (2012). *He Akoranga He Aratohu: Māori & Pacific Education Initiative: Lessons to Guide Innovative Philanthropic & Social Practice*. ASB Community Trust. Auckland.

In conclusion

The research report highlights some of the tensions between government and communities when they work together. Funders need to walk a fine line between a ‘hands off’ approach (intended to empower communities) and providing assistance to build capacity to deliver and be accountable, which can end up disempowering the community. The report identifies a number of factors that help make community-level initiatives successful and some suggested actions government and communities could do to remove some of the barriers.

Future work is needed to identify what approaches are most effective in promoting the factors associated with successful community-level initiatives. The Evidence2Success³ initiative is a potential example that attempts to balance the needs of communities and funders. Evidence2Success is based on Communities That Care, which is described in the research report, and should be considered as a possible model for improving how government support communities to achieve their goals.

Evidence2Success

Evidence2Success has developed a programme to support communities that want to improve the outcomes for their children. It leaves the decision making up to the community, but provides them with the information they need to identify outcomes, target help to where it is needed and choose initiatives that are proven to work.

The initiative uses local data to understand a community’s specific risk factors and needs for their children. A community can compare their data with other locations to give them a sense of how well their children are doing. It then provides a database of tested and effective services that is used to highlight the current services in the community that have no evidence of effectiveness. Then, using the local data, government and funders can begin gaining local community buy-in on selecting evidence-based practices to more effectively address the needs of their children.


Evidence2Success is an example of a model that balances the interests of the community and the funder. The community gets to decide what they need and the funder is assured that the community is using evidence to assess their needs and to select initiatives that work.

³ See <http://www.aecf.org/work/evidence-based-practice/evidence2success/>



Download the full report and literature scan: superu.govt.nz/effective_community_level_change

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The Families Commission operates under the name Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (Superu)