

Lessons and experiences in co-designing an Indigenous leadership, governance, and decision-making model: *Te Remu Huia*

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Received 31 May 2025 ; Accepted 16 October 2025 ; Published 7 November 2025

ABSTRACT

In response to the introduction of the *Pae Ora* (Healthy Futures) Act in *Aotearoa*/New Zealand, which prioritizes Māori self-determination in health, the *Ngāti Hauiti* tribe initiated a research project to develop an Indigenous leadership, governance, and decision-making model rooted in their cultural values. This initiative, led by Whakauae Research Services Ltd, culminated in the co-design of *Te Remu Huia*, a model built on the *tikanga* (customs) and *kōrero tuku iho* (oral traditions) of *Ngāti Hauiti*.

Drawing on the symbolic tail feathers of the huia bird, a tribal emblem of *rangatiratanga* (chieftainship), the model reframes governance around consensus, cultural identity, and intergenerational responsibility. Using a *Kaupapa* Māori methodology, the team conducted in-depth interviews with 22 Māori leaders and held multiple *wānanga* (workshops) to collaboratively develop the model's principles, people, and processes. The co-design process emphasized relational trust, positionality, and the lived experiences of council members.

Te Remu Huia integrates *mātauranga* Māori (Māori knowledge) with practical tools from *Pākehā* (Western) governance, enabling strategic use of administrative systems without compromising cultural integrity. Its flexible framework, including the development of *Te Whare* and *Kaupapa Kōrero*, allows for the incorporation of traditional decision-making within contemporary contexts.

Despite being entirely voluntary and under-resourced, the *Rūnanga* (tribal council) demonstrated deep commitment, viewing governance as a sacred duty to both ancestors and future generations. The project also acknowledges the structural limitations imposed by colonial legacies, including economic constraints that hinder the sustainability of unpaid leadership.

Te Remu Huia is both a reclaiming of Indigenous governance and a pragmatic response to modern challenges, offering a culturally grounded model for systemic transformation. It provides valuable insights for other Indigenous nations seeking to embed self-determination into leadership and health equity frameworks. The model continues to evolve through implementation and real-world piloting, representing a living expression of *tino rangatiratanga*. This article reflects on the lessons learned through the co-design process and emphasizes the power of Indigenous knowledge, collaboration, and resilience in reshaping governance to serve Indigenous aspirations on their own terms.

Keywords: Indigenous, leadership, governance, decision-making, New Zealand

Abstract in Español at the end of the article

INTRODUCTION

In 2022, the *Pae Ora* (Healthy Futures) Act [1] was introduced in *Aotearoa*/New Zealand to promote health equity and support Māori self-determination within the health system. A key aspect of the Act is the establishment of Iwi-Māori Partnership Boards, which aim to represent Māori needs and aspirations in relation to health outcomes and provide *whānau* with a voice in the design and delivery of services and public health interventions [1]. The creation of Iwi-Māori Partnership Boards resulted in an immediate, nationwide requirement for highly skilled, experienced, and tribally mandated leaders to represent the health aspirations of their respective tribes. Taking advantage of the opportunity to up-skill the governance and leadership skills of *Ngāti Hauiti* members in particular, Whakauae Research Services Ltd, the tribe's own research centre, began work on a research project, *Rapua Te Ara Rangatira Kia Hikitia Ai Te Oranga Tangata* (Leadership, governance, and decision-making models to achieve health equity). The project sought to create new knowledge on the leadership, governance, and decision-making models required for Iwi/Māori to make significant and enduring advances in health equity. In this work, a new, bespoke, governance model, *Te Remu Huia*, was co-designed in partnership with the *Ngāti Hauiti* tribal council, *Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Hauiti*.

Te Remu Huia is an Indigenous leadership, governance, and decision-making model centred on *Ngāti Hauiti* culture and language, grounded in *tikanga* (practices) and *kōrero tuku iho* (oral traditions). The model draws on the imagery and characteristics of the huia bird, a guardian for *Ngāti Hauiti* symbolising rangatiratanga (chieftainship) for Māori throughout *Aotearoa* (2).

A central feature of *Te Remu Huia* is the deliberate shift away from imposed colonial decision-making structures and the reclamation of traditional decision-making processes, including, for example, consensus-based governance. The model re-establishes consensus processes where diverse voices contribute to collective decisions. This return to Indigenous governance systems acknowledges their enduring effectiveness in addressing contemporary challenges, such as health inequities. By centring these practices into formal structures, *Te Remu Huia* aims to effect systemic change for *tino rangatiratanga* (self-determination) that reflects *Ngāti Hauiti*'s traditions, values, and aspirations [2].

The study employed a *Kaupapa* Māori methodology [3], drawing on qualitative data to develop the *Te Remu Huia* model. Initially, twenty-two Iwi leaders and governors from the southern/western regions of the North Island participated in in-depth interviews. The research team then facilitated two *wānanga* (workshops) with five leaders from an Iwi confederation, which includes the tribe of *Ngāti Hauiti*. Through inductive thematic analysis [4] the team identified three foundational categories: Principles, People, and Processes. These were further developed into twelve distinct subheadings, mirroring

the twelve tail feathers of the huia bird. This structure informed the naming convention: “*Te Remu o te Huia*” (the tail feathers of the huia) for the model, with “*Ngā Rau Matua*” (the feathers) for features and “*Te Rau*” (the feather) for subheadings [2].

In February 2024, the *Rapua* team presented the initial model as a draft workbook at the *Rūnanga*'s quarterly strategy *hui*, beginning a year-long co-design process of reviewing and revising the model through multiple *wānanga* and feedback cycles. This collaborative process resulted in several revisions, including adopting the more concise name, “*Te Remu Huia*”. In March 2025, the Final Pilot Handbook was presented to the *Rūnanga*, beginning a further year-long process of implementing and piloting the model in a real-world setting. The handbook begins with the *Infographic: Introduction to Te Remu Huia* (Figure 1).

Many lessons were garnered during the process of conceptualising, designing, and refining the model with the *Rūnanga*. Four in particular are worth highlighting, namely:

1. Research and trust
2. *Mātauranga* Māori (Māori knowledge) and *Kaupapa* Māori research
3. *Pākehā* (Western) influences
4. Voluntary governance realities

Ethics and consent

The New Zealand Ethics Committee granted ethical consent for this project on 17 September 2022 [NZEC 2022_25]. The research is also supported by the *Tikanga* Advisory Board at Whakauae Research Services.

LESSONS

Research and trust

Māori communities have historically experienced harmful and exploitative research practices, creating a legacy of distrust [3, p. 11]. Employing *Kaupapa* Māori methodology was vital to nurturing trust between the project team and the *Rūnanga* as the researchers undertook the study more broadly and as they worked with *Rūnanga* delegates specifically to develop the governance model.

Kaupapa Māori theory emerged from the Māori renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s, marking a pivotal transition from reactive politics to proactive self-development. This shift influenced transformative initiatives like *Te Kōhanga Reo* and *Kura Kaupapa* Māori [3, p. 80]; early childhood and school-based language immersion education initiatives. Graham Hingangaroa Smith's [4] academic articulation of *Kaupapa* Māori theory centred *tino rangatiratanga* (self-determination), while Linda Tuhiwai Smith [3, p. 113] further developed *Kaupapa* Māori as a research methodology, fundamentally questioning “what happens when the researched becomes the researcher?”.



Figure 1. Infographic: Introduction to *Te Remu Huia* (Reproduced with permission from Whakauae Research Services Ltd.

Central to *Kaupapa* Māori methodology is the concept of positionality, which Pihama [6] describes as positioning oneself in relation to the *papa* (ground) or *Papātūānuku* (earth mother). For the *Rapua Te Ara Rangatira Kia Hikitia Ai Te Oranga Tangata* project, insider/outsider positionality manifests across multiple interconnected layers, each contributing to an environment critical for co-design. These include, for example:

- the established institutional, relationship between Whakauae Research Services Ltd and the *Rūnanga*;
- the long-term personal connection between the research project's principal investigator (also Whakauae's Research Director) and the *Rūnanga*;
- the dual roles held by two research team members who serve as researcher/project lead and research assistant respectively while also actively serving as *Manu Taki* (council members); and
- the traditional cultural responsibilities these team members hold within the Iwi beyond their *Rūnanga* duties, including roles as *Pou Kōrero* (traditional knowledge holders) and *Kaikōrero* (orators).

These multifaceted relationships have fostered a special connection between the project team and the collective of council members known as *Te Whirikōkō*. Grounded in *whanaungatanga* (relationships), this intimate understanding of each *Manu Taki*'s (council member) personality and working style has proven invaluable for effective *wānanga* (planning). The ability to strategically compose productive breakout groups based on interpersonal dynamics has enhanced the collaborative process and depth of engagement throughout the project.

Mātauranga (knowledge) Māori and Kaupapa (research) Māori

Being a *Kaupapa* Māori researcher establishes a critical positioning for researchers to engage with collective knowledge systems. Through our relationships within communities, we can connect with knowledge holders, bridge gaps in *kōrero tuku iho* (oral traditions), and develop a deeper understanding of traditional knowledge. Contrary to commonly held beliefs on the part of the Western academy, *mātauranga* Māori is not confined to historical contexts but continues as a living, evolving knowledge system that can be collectively reclaimed, reinterpreted, and expanded [7]. This perspective ac-

knowledges that one need not be an expert to participate meaningfully in the collective revitalisation of Indigenous knowledge.

The relationship between *Kaupapa* Māori and *mātauranga* Māori illustrates this dynamic interplay. As Durie (8, p. 5) notes, *Kaupapa* Māori represents “a way of understanding things” that has created “space for Māori people, culture, knowledge, and values in the academy” [9, p. 110]. While distinct from *mātauranga* Māori itself, *Kaupapa* Māori establishes conditions whereby “Māori [can] legitimately conduct their own studies of *mātauranga* Māori” [4, p. 11], facilitating action-taking that advances that knowledge [9].

At the same time, *mātauranga* Māori provides the essential epistemological foundation for *Kaupapa* Māori theory. Pihama [6, p. 7] argues that “being grounded in Māori knowledge, *Kaupapa* Māori cannot be understood without knowledge of *mātauranga* Māori and the ways Māori engage knowledge and forms of knowing”. These concepts are interwoven, continuously informing and transforming each other through an organic process rather than a static linear doctrine [6, p. 11].

The development of a formal consensus decision-making process within *Te Remu Huia* exemplifies this process of knowledge reclamation. Drawing from the *pākeke kawā* (marae protocols) used during *pōwhiri* (welcome ceremony), the project team created the *Kaupapa Kōrero* (discussion topics) framework. This framework intentionally establishes space for both *Tūmatauenga* (the deity of war), allowing grievances to be aired, and *Rongo* (the deity of peace), enabling rational and considered debate. Through *wānanga*, the *Rūnanga* discussed how these *kōrero tuku iho* (oral traditions) could inform contemporary governance practices. The project team synthesised these insights into the *Kaupapa Kōrero* process, which the *Rūnanga* subsequently approved for pilot implementation, demonstrating how collective engagement with *mātauranga* Māori can create innovative approaches to today’s governance challenges [2].

Pākehā (Western) influences

The development of *Te Remu Huia* has required careful consideration of non-Indigenous governance influences. Initial data collection involved interviews with leaders and governors operating within Western legal entities such as trusts and boards, naturally incorporating perspectives shaped by Western governance frameworks. This reality reflects the contemporary experience of many Indigenous leaders who have acquired skills from Western environments, noting that many of these skills or tools have been helpful in advancing effective governance practices. This intersection of epistemologies sparked a question for the project team: How can Western processes or tools be integrated into the model? This question led to the development of a further framework in the *Te Remu Huia* model, *Te Whare* [2].

Te Whare is inspired by the *tikanga* (practices) of the *marae* (traditional meeting place), particularly *pōwhiri*

processes. In this framework, the *hau kāinga* (home people) determine the *kaawa* (protocols) and *tikanga* (practices), while *manuwhiri* (visitors) follow these rules. The speaking order during council meetings, therefore, follows the *kaawa of pākeke*, where the *hau kāinga* speak first and *manuwhiri* follow, reflecting how the *mauri* (energy) of the discussion moves from *tara iti* (left side of the meeting house) to the *tara nui* (right side) [2].

Within *Te Remu Huia*, the *Rūnanga* positions itself as *hau kāinga*, maintaining agency over its governance systems while selectively choosing Western systems that enhance operations without compromising cultural identity. This adaptive approach welcomes tools, procedures, and administrative processes provided they align with the *Rūnanga’s tikanga* or values. Examples of *Pākehā* tools that support *Te Remu Huia* include the use of technical software (e.g. BoardPro); communication platforms (email, video conferencing); and administrative systems (meeting documentation, reporting frameworks, and financial management systems). The integration of *Pākehā* tools into a *rangatiratanga* model exemplifies how Indigenous governance can engage with non-Indigenous influences while maintaining cultural identity and self-determination [2].

Voluntary governance realities

The implementation of the *Te Remu Huia* model occurs within a context of significant resource constraints that shape governance realities for the *Rūnanga*. All the individuals that come together as the collective of council members, *Te Whirikōkō*, do so on a voluntary basis. There is no financial compensation for these roles beyond basic expense coverage, usually in the form of petrol vouchers to cover the travel required for meeting attendance. Despite this lack of remuneration, members shoulder enormous responsibilities, both to *tupuna* (ancestors) and *mokopuna* (future generations) [2].

The voluntary nature of the model and resulting work creates inevitable challenges. *Rūnanga* members balance their governance responsibilities alongside demanding professional careers, other board and trust positions, other commitments, and *whānau* (family) responsibilities.

Despite these significant constraints, what stands out as a salient experience throughout both the research project and the *Te Remu Huia* co-design process itself has been the unwavering dedication of the *Rūnanga* to the co-design journey. Their consistent participation and thoughtful engagement highlight the *mana* (power) they place on this work. Even when facing competing demands on their limited time and energy, members have prioritised attendance at *wānanga* to provide insights that have shaped the model. This commitment speaks volumes about their collective dedication to creating intergenerational transformative change.

The tribe’s inability to remunerate board members traces back to colonial policies and enduring structural inequities. *Ngāti Hauiti*, like many tribes, experienced

significant land loss that eroded their economic foundation, impacts that continue to constrain their financial capacity today [10, p. 117]. In 2021, *Ngāti Hauiti* began Treaty of *Waitangi* settlement negotiations with the Crown, with discussions continuing through May 2025.

Looking ahead, the *Rūnanga* must consider transitioning from its voluntary governance model toward compensated leadership positions to attract and retain the expertise needed to advance health equity and achieve broader aspirations for *Ngāti Hauiti*.

Conclusion

Te Remu Huia represents a significant achievement in Indigenous leadership and governance, creating a model that balances cultural reclamation with contemporary realities. Through the careful integration of *mātauranga* Māori and non-Indigenous tools, the *Rūnanga*'s commitment, despite resource constraints, demonstrates how Indigenous communities can create or reclaim governance systems that reflect their values and aspirations. The co-design process itself embodies collective *mātauranga* (knowledge) and consensus. As the *Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Hauiti* begins to implement this model, *Te Remu Huia* offers valuable insights for other Indigenous nations working to decolonise/indigenise governance to advance challenges like health equity. Furthermore, it provides a foundation for ongoing work of *tino rangatiratanga* (self-determination), acknowledging both *tupuna* (ancestors) and *mokopuna* (future generations).

DECLARATIONS

AI utilization

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

Funding

This project is one of three research projects under the *Kia Puāwai ake ngā uri whakatupu: flourishing future generations* programme. The *Kia Puāwai* programme is funded by the Health Research Council New Zealand [21/716]

Author contributions

AB and UP conceptualised the project and acquired funding. UP led data collection, supported by LE. LE contributed to the project design and drafted the manuscript. AB revised the manuscript for intellectual content. All authors reviewed the final version of the article.

Data availability

Not applicable.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge *Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Hauiti* for supporting the co-design of the *Te Remu Huia* model. We also acknowledge Health Research Council New Zealand for funding the *Kia Puāwai* programme.

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ABSTRACT IN SPANISH

Lecciones y experiencias en el co-diseño de un modelo Indígena de liderazgo, gobernanza y toma de decisiones: *Te Remu Huia*

En respuesta a la promulgación del acto *Pae Ora* (Futuros saludables) en *Aotearoa*/Nueva Zelanda, que prioriza la autodeterminación Maorí en materia de salud, la tribu *Ngāti Hauiti* inició un proyecto de investigación para desarrollar un modelo indígena de liderazgo, gobernanza y toma de decisiones basado en sus valores culturales. Esta iniciativa, liderada por Whakauae Research Services Ltd, culminó en el co-diseño de *Te Remu Huia*, un modelo construido a partir de las *tikanga* (costumbres) y las *kōrero* *tuku iho* (tradiciones orales) de *Ngāti Hauiti*.

Inspirado en las plumas caudales del ave huia, un emblema tribal de *rangatiratanga* (jefatura o liderazgo), el modelo redefine la gobernanza en torno al consenso, la identidad cultural y la responsabilidad intergeneracional. Utilizando una metodología *Kaupapa* Māori, el equipo realizó entrevistas en profundidad con 22 líderes maoríes y organizó múltiples *wānanga* (talleres) para desarrollar de manera colaborativa los principios, las personas y los procesos del modelo. El proceso de co-diseño puso énfasis en la confianza relacional, la reflexividad posicional y las experiencias vividas de los miembros del consejo.

Te Remu Huia integra el *mātauranga* Māori (conocimiento maorí) con herramientas prácticas de la gobernanza *Pākehā* (occidental), permitiendo un uso estratégico de los sistemas administrativos sin comprometer la integridad cultural. Su marco flexible, que incluye el desarrollo de *Te Whare* y *Kaupapa Kōrero*, facilita la incorporación de formas tradicionales de toma de decisiones en contextos contemporáneos.

A pesar de ser un trabajo completamente voluntario y con recursos limitados, el *Rūnanga* (consejo tribal) demostró un profundo compromiso, considerando la gobernanza como un deber sagrado hacia los antepasados y las generaciones futuras. El proyecto también reconoce las limitaciones estructurales impuestas por las herencias coloniales, incluidas las restricciones económicas que dificultan la sostenibilidad de los liderazgos no remunerados.

Te Remu Huia representa tanto una recuperación de la gobernanza indígena como una respuesta pragmática a los desafíos contemporáneos, ofreciendo un modelo culturalmente fundamentado para la transformación sistémica. Aporta conocimientos valiosos para otras naciones indígenas que buscan integrar la autodeterminación en sus marcos de liderazgo y equidad en salud. El modelo continúa evolucionando a través de su implementación y pilotaje en contextos reales, constituyendo una expresión viva del *tino rangatiratanga*. Este artículo reflexiona sobre las lecciones aprendidas durante el proceso de co-diseño y resalta el poder del conocimiento indígena, la colaboración y la resiliencia en la reconfiguración de la gobernanza al servicio de las aspiraciones indígenas en sus propios términos.

Palabras clave: Indígenas, liderazgo, gobernanza, toma de decisiones, Nueva Zelanda

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