



Island Innovation Policy Brief:

Redefining Health for Island Communities: What Island Communities Can Learn from Māori Approaches

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Health for Māori, Indigenous to Aotearoa New Zealand, encompasses more than just the absence of illness; it includes cultural practices, identity, and self-determination. This article examines how current health initiatives in Aotearoa New Zealand aimed at improving Māori health frequently focus on disparities by comparing Māori outcomes to non-Indigenous standards. Although these efforts are well-intentioned, they can reinforce deficit-based perspectives and fail to fully acknowledge Māori worldviews and aspirations.

Global Relevance: Lessons for Island Communities

The insights from this article extend beyond Māori and are relevant to many island communities worldwide, particularly those under colonial influence. Indigenous peoples across various island communities face similar health disparities due to historical marginalization and external health standards that do not align with their cultural values. By adopting a tangata whenua approach and integrating Indigenous knowledge and leadership into health policies, these island communities can work towards reclaiming their health sovereignty. This type of approach allows Indigenous communities to prioritize their unique needs, address systemic disparities more effectively, and foster resilience in their health systems.

A Tangata Whenua Approach

Rooted in Māori rights and mātauranga (ways of knowing), the article emphasizes a tangata whenua (people of the land) approach to health. It highlights the state of Māori health before colonization, the ongoing impacts of colonization, and Māori-led responses to contemporary health challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a case study, illustrating the crucial need for Indigenous leadership in health crises. Māori-led successes during the pandemic contrast sharply with government oversights, underscoring the effectiveness of Indigenous-led responses.

Paradigm Shift in Health Policies

The article advocates for a paradigm shift in health policies. It argues for Māori self-determination in shaping health initiatives, incorporating Indigenous knowledge and values into health frameworks and policy-making processes. This includes respecting te reo (Māori language) and tikanga (principles).

Towards Empowered Health Solutions

The article calls for a transformative approach to health that recognizes Indigenous rights and embraces a holistic view of health linked to cultural identity and environmental stewardship. It emphasizes the importance of empowering Indigenous communities to define and drive their own health and wellbeing agendas. This framework offers a valuable blueprint for improving health outcomes in other colonized or colonizing island regions, helping them achieve greater health equity and resilience.

References

I. Reweti, Angelique, Felicity Ware, and Hoani Moriarty. 2022. "A Tangata Whenua (People of the Land) Approach to Conceptualising Māori Health and Wellbeing." *Global Health Promotion* 30 (2): 175797592211309. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17579759221130948>

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