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Strengthening Communities through Local Partnerships: Building a collaborative research project

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the early stages of a Foundation for Research Science and Technology social research project aimed at identifying the overall range, scope and effectiveness of local partnerships (including Maori and Pacific partnerships), both at a national level and in Waitakere and Christchurch Cities. This paper examines the issues that have arisen during the first year of the project as stakeholder relationships have been developed around the research project, and the respective roles and responsibilities of the parties in relation to the research goals have been clarified. We discuss the implications of current funding arrangements, differing institutional cultures and the legacy of ‘competitive contractualism’ for our efforts to link research, policy and practice in mutually beneficial ways. We hope that sharing our experiences will lead to ‘organisational learning’ and improved research policies and practices, particular in relation to social research projects.

Introduction

Considerable weight is now being placed on collaborations and partnerships in public good research projects. This paper reports on the early stages of a Foundation for Research Science and Technology social research project aimed at identifying the overall range, scope and effectiveness of local partnerships (including Maori and Pacific partnerships), both at a national level and in Waitakere and Christchurch Cities. The research outcomes in this project are being achieved through a partnership approach between university researchers, local governmental officials and local facilitators.

This paper examines the issues that have arisen during the first year of the project as stakeholder relationships have been developed around the research project, and the respective roles and responsibilities of the parties in relation to the research goals have been clarified. In particular, we focus on the relationship between the University of Auckland and Waitakere City Council, the issues that have arisen, and the strategies we have adopted. In this discussion we move back and forth between our combined voices and our individual voices, reflecting the multiple conversations through which this project, and indeed the paper itself, has developed and taken a particular form.

As the *University of Auckland* researchers involved in this project, we wish to begin by clearly stating that we are supportive of and actively engaging with, the increased opportunities for more sustained engagement between the university and its diverse communities. We are very aware of the critique of 'ivory tower academics' - although not entirely convinced of its validity - and the need to build relationships that

will further foster the research needed to facilitate economic and social development. At the same time, however, we are wary of the potential for diminishing the importance of critical social science research in favour of applied, instrumentalist, approaches to contemporary economic and social problems. Like Castree and Sparke (2000:229), we aspire to ‘turn the age of accountability into an accountable...persistently reopened project of building critical, intellectually informed communities of research, writing and action’. The questions that arise of course include: How might this occur? What are the issues that will need to be addressed?

As long-term *Waitakere City Council* government officials, our motivation for engagement with the university is different. We are not unaccustomed to working with academics, although our previous efforts have been more oriented to the solving of specific problems, notably in the areas of employment, housing and the environment. We are also very familiar with the research tools used for the purposes of project and process evaluation. This particular project, however, was motivated by qualitatively different concerns. Rather than addressing problems ‘out there’ we saw the research relationship with the university as providing the potential for description and analysis of Waitakere partnership based projects, and as a means to create possibilities for action with identifiable and measurable benefits for local communities. In particular, as one of the first New Zealand local authorities to establish a dedicated team for building strategic partnerships, we are committed to the ongoing development of partnering structures, processes and principles. Another major motivation was the identification of institutional/legal/financial barriers to partnerships, particularly at central government level, and ways to remove or deal

with these in order to advance local aspirations. Consequently, understanding how our practical and immediate needs might be reconciled with the more critical and conceptual approach that characterises the work of university researchers was a central challenge in this project.

Together, we develop our discussion of stakeholder relationships by presenting a brief overview of the actual research project, then outlining the overall aspirations for the research process. This is not only a research project *on* partnerships it is also research that is being done *in* partnership. At this point, it is important to stress that both the University of Auckland researchers and the Waitakere City Council are happy with the progress of the research to date. The project is giving rise to a sustained intellectual and political engagement that is producing community and policy relevant outputs as well as academic papers (see <http://www.lpg.org.nz> for further information). That said, there are a range of issues we think worthy of tabling for further discussion and reflection. In the paper we discuss the implications of current funding arrangements, differing institutional cultures and the legacy of ‘competitive contractualism’ for our efforts to link research, policy and practice in mutually beneficial ways. We hope that sharing our experiences will lead to ‘organisational learning’ and improved research policies and practices, particular in relation to social science projects. Finally, we conclude by suggesting that our experiences may have implications for broader efforts to develop ‘joined up’ government.

The Research Project

In recent years considerable effort has gone into strengthening communities, building local capacity and enhancing control through local partnerships. Local partnerships

take a variety of forms, from short-term one off projects to long-term institutional arrangements. In general, however, they tend to be inter-sectoral, multi-cultural and multi-level, involving community organizations and local and central governments. Examples include: community health plans; interagency wellbeing strategies; iwi-based and urban Maori service delivery; full service schools; health and education action zones; healthy cities partnerships; safer communities programmes; 'strengthening communities' and 'strengthening families' projects; local 'peak' bodies (e.g. principals groups, cultural advisory boards); information networks; youth councils; area based employment and training projects; and 'one stop shops' for government services.

Seen together, these local partnerships represent innovative strategies on the part of community groups *and* the cutting edge of decentralized, locally responsive government. They present important challenges to more traditional centralized, vertically integrated, sectoral approaches to social service provision and community support. Yet, because these initiatives are by definition different in different places, they tend to be seen as discrete efforts. They often depend on short term funding, and on the efforts of a small number of key actors. Local partnerships also struggle to define and defend their mandates in relation to central government, and are challenged by ongoing fragmentation in the broader social services sector.

The aim of the research project is to identify the overall range, scope and effectiveness of local partnerships. What forms of local partnerships are developing, and which of these generate inclusive and sustainable economic and social control? What roles do local facilitators play, and how can these be enhanced? How do local

partnerships facilitate access to networks, information and opportunities for communities, families/whanau and individuals? What barriers impede multi party partnerships from flourishing? The intended research outcomes are to establish a firmer, more evidence based, understanding of the role local partnerships play in enhancing community capacity, and a basis for provider development by actively engaging local facilitators.

This has proved to be a very timely research project. Following the publication of the Community and Voluntary Sector Working Group report in April 2001, the New Zealand Government signed a formal Statement of Governmental Intention signalling their commitment to building strong and respectful relationships with community, voluntary and iwi/Maori organisations. In this document the language of partnership features centrally; ‘Government will be an active partner in building a relationship based on honesty, trust and integrity – tika and pono; compassion and caring – aroha and manaakitanga; and recognition of diversity’ (New Zealand Government 2001). Similarly, the Review of the Centre released in November 2001, identified a number of key areas (including policing, business development, employment assistance, public health and multiple disadvantage families) in which new ways of working based on localised collaborative approaches, are understood to be most appropriate (The Advisory Group on the Review of the Centre 2002). Individual efforts to establish government/non government collaborations in Aotearoa New Zealand are beginning to be documented (see, for example, Maynard and Wood 2002). In this context, it is not surprising that there has been strong academic, policy and practitioner interest in the project both nationally and internationally.

The Research Process

The project is not only about local partnerships - it is being developed using a partnership-based methodology. Conceptual and methodological aspects of the original proposal evolved through a dialogue between University of Auckland researchers, central government officials and local officials in Waitakere City Council. It was understood, and stated in the original proposal, that it was crucial to the project's success that the collaborative approach be continued and broadened, so that the project could both maximise opportunities for 'synergies' between the different constituencies, and better meet 'end-user' needs. Since receiving the funding, there has been extensive liaison with both central and local government officials, and more recently, a sustained engagement with relevant Maori and Pacific organisations and leaders.

Waitakere City and Christchurch City, are key research sites for the project. While local partnerships are actively pursued in both places, the two localities represent two different problem types. Waitakere is an ethnically and economically diverse locality in which there are important local partnerships addressing place-based wellbeing (e.g. the Ranui Action Project). A significant three-way collaboration structure has been established between the Waitakere City Council, community sector and central government agencies. Christchurch is more ethnically homogeneous and has developed a significant profile through the Canterbury Development Corporation and other initiatives. At the same time, concern with pockets of social exclusion means the Council is seeking research partners to extend its 'social monitoring programme'. More recently, there have been major efforts to develop an improved collaborative planning model between the Christchurch City Council and central government

agencies and between non government organisations. This model may have application for local authorities and central government agencies nationally.

The University of Auckland has established a formal research agreement with Waitakere City Council. A Memorandum of Understanding has been signed, and a Waitakere City Council employee is working two days a week on the Waitakere locality study together with a member of the University research team. Other Waitakere City Council staff (including Maori and Pacific officers), are also contributing to the project in association with relevant university researchers. It is anticipated that these research collaborations between the University and Waitakere City Council will last for the duration of the research project.

Appropriate research relationships have also been established in Christchurch. The Sustainable Cities Trust has provided research support in terms of access to different partnering networks and assisting with preparation of contracted outputs. The personnel of the Trust are also concerned with the academic examination of partnering and are contributing accordingly to the project. Collaborative relationships have also been established with Christchurch City Council staff who have facilitated conceptual framing of both research and end-user projects, the sharing of information, and the initial framing of the shared learning groups that will run in the second year of the project.

At a national level, ongoing consultation with the Community and Voluntary Sector Working Party is ensuring linkages between the respective work programmes. The research project has been further refined through participation in academic and end-

user forums organised by the Ministry of Social Development, Department of Internal Affairs and the Royal Society of New Zealand amongst others. Finally, there is a strong emphasis in the project on 'end-user' relevant outputs. Dissemination of the research results will occur through conventional academic outputs, as well as practitioner outputs, including a web-site, plain English 'issues' guides, shared learning groups in the second year of the project, and regular 'end-user' seminars involving local facilitators, city councils, community leaders and relevant government agencies. These end-user forums have already begun, with a successful project launch held at the University of Auckland in April 2002 attracting over one hundred people.

On the face of it, this social policy project looks like an exemplar of the new collaborative and partnerships based forms of research. At the same time, some issues have arisen during the first phase of the project that we think are worth sharing with the broader research and policy communities.

It is our assertion that despite the new emphasis on collaboration and partnerships in social science research, and the best intentions of all concerned, research partnerships such as our own remain caught in funding relationships and institutional cultures that have a closer resemblance to the hierarchical contractual relationships of a previous political moment than they do with the more inclusive rhetoric that currently abounds. Moreover, our efforts to undertake partnership-based research have involved negotiating differing institutional cultures and expectations. The paper aspires to document and evaluate the research process to date in order to tease out the benefits and drawbacks of partnership approaches to policy relevant research. It should be

noted that many of these issues are being worked out on a day-to-day basis by the researchers and officials involved in the project.

Funding arrangements

The project is funded by the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology. We are very grateful for their financial support, without which a project of this magnitude and scope could never have been initiated. We also applaud the increasing emphasis that FoRST is placing on collaborations and partnerships. That said, we want to make a few comments about those aspects of current funding arrangements that have worked against our efforts to work collaboratively on this project.

Most immediately, there is the issue of funding periods. We first heard in April 2001 that the project had been awarded funding . Our proposal had requested three years of funding and stated that the research would be conducted over calendar years 2002-4. However, while we were awarded virtually all the funding we had asked for, the contract we were offered was backdated to January 2001. Not only were we being expected to complete an ambitious, community based, three year project in two and a half years, but also the first two objectives (primarily concerned with relationship building) were short changed as a direct consequence of the reduced funding period. While we were able to address this issue by way of a file note appended to our contract saying the research period would be extended without penalty, government budgetary processes, rather than research design determined our original contract period. We have since been alerted to the fact that this budgetary issue exemplifies an

ongoing, institutional problem for many relationships with government agencies, in effect an 'early finding' of the project.¹

The funding period was particularly problematic, given the emphasis on building relationships in the original proposal. Indeed, we note that the neglect of funding for relationship building has been identified as a more generic problem in community based research, and the need for dedicated funding emerged as one of the key recommendations from the Department of Internal Affairs workshop on community-based research held late in 2001. With the new FoRST emphasis on collaborative research processes, there is a clear need to appropriately recognise and resource relationship building - not as an optional extra, but as an integral part of the research project. Moreover, in recognising that relationship building is an integral part of the research process, allowance must also be made for the time it takes to create and sustain a collaborative research framework.

More generally, it appears to us that the FoRST contracting process remains premised on a science-based model that does not easily lend itself to community based research projects. The compartmentalisation of research processes, the strictly delineated research outputs and outcomes, and the insistence on hierarchical contractual relationships counters the new emphasis on collaboration.

For example, while the University of Auckland and Waitakere City Council understand themselves to be working in partnership on this project, for the purposes of the FoRST contract, the University of Auckland holds the contract and Waitakere

¹ We recognise that that the government allocates funding within financial years and that there is considerable pressure on the Foundation to ensure the funds are spent by the end of each year.

City Council is a sub-contractor. We note that the language and legal status of ‘sub-contracting’ is particularly problematic for those who work in the community sector and remember all too well the sharply delineated outputs and outcomes associated with the ‘competitive contractualism’ of the 1990s. Finally, as the contract holder, the University of Auckland retains the overhead component of the funding. While we appreciate the need for full cost recovery on externally funded university research projects, we would like to underline the (unilateral) signal this sends to research ‘partners’. Finally, despite our initial objections, it was made quite clear to us that there was no scope to challenge FoRST on either the nature of their documents or their funding process.

We fully support the increasing emphasis placed on collaboration and partnerships in public good research, as exemplified in the recently revised FoRST reporting template. By combining diverse institutional interests, it is much more likely that synergies will be generated that break down traditional ‘silos’ and the gaps between researchers, policymakers and practitioners bridged through dialogue, consensus building and shared decision making. However, at the time of writing this paper, it is our considered view that funding, contractual and administrative processes (perhaps unintentionally) constrain the parameters of research initiatives in ways that make it difficult to move into more fully relational and collaborative projects. At present, both the contract holder and their partners are ultimately left in a highly dependent position in relation to the funding agency’s stipulations regarding the scope and nature of the project.

The University of Auckland: Managing the Research Process

The next issue to be confronted in this project was the question of exactly what a collaborative or partnership research would look like ‘on the ground’. Just as with partnerships more generally, there is a continuum of possibilities as to the form research partnerships might take, ranging from sub-contracts to horizontal networks. Geddes and Bennington (2001:2) note, ‘Partnership is not a phenomenon that can be wholly differentiated, conceptually or empirically, from other forms of policy collaboration and inter-organisational working’. Moreover, unlike laboratory based projects, where it may be possible to standardise methodologies amongst different parts of the research, in this particular research project it was clear - and indeed entirely appropriate - that the different researchers involved in the project would approach their parts of the project differently, and that the project design would have to accommodate this. These methodological differences were apparent, not only in terms of the differences between political and research processes in Waitakere and Christchurch, but perhaps even more fundamentally, in relation to the Maori and Pacific components of the project. ‘Triangulation’ between the differing theoretical and methodological approaches has replaced ‘replicability’ or ‘standardisation’ as our guarantee of rigour. However, fulfilling the overall aims of the project still requires collective ways of working, based on regular dialogue and the sharing of information amongst the research team members, in order to ensure comparability and coherence.

In each component of the project there has been an effort to move beyond “research on” to developing strategies for “research with”. It should be noted that participatory research has a long tradition in social science research (Marcus 1995). It involves actively engaging research participants, explicit negotiation of the research process,

and an emancipatory focus in the research goals. The goals of the research combine academic concerns of data collection and analysis with those of capacity building and empowerment. However, there has also been considerable discussion of the relative status of the University's relationships with Waitakere and Christchurch, as well as the status of the two local authorities in relation to other stakeholders (notably, government departments and local communities). Moreover, our project has run headlong into the question of the relationship between the myriad of local partnerships our project aims to study and THE partnership – that between iwi and the Crown. Cutting across all of these discussions about the scope and content of the various research relationships are questions of accountability. To whom are the research project and the university researchers ultimately accountable? FoRST? Ministry of Social Development? International academic colleagues? The research partners? Grassroots communities? All of the above? Certainly, we have found that we have needed to develop a language that allows dialogue across academic, policy and community groups, while recognising that each have their own agendas and accountabilities.

These issues are neither unique nor short-term. They are fundamental to collaborative projects such as ours. A partnership approach to research will take various forms depending on the researchers, institutions and communities involved, and will require considerable patience and learning about the different cultures in which the 'partners' operate. We would also note that these issues raise important questions about the sustainability of partnership based research programmes. Moves towards more collaborative forms of research will inevitably involve research design that maximises opportunities for input and participation. At the same time, they will inevitably give

rise to complex forms of research that pose challenges in regard to timeliness and organisational and academic effectiveness. It comes as no surprise that academics are not supportive of notions such as line management. However, for inherently fragmented research projects such as this, oversight and management consumes a significant amount of time and energy, and relies primarily on the good will of individuals involved and their personal and social skills.

Waitakere City Council: Researching Council concerns

For the Council officials involved, the question of what the project would look like on the ground was also framed by sensitivity to the effects of the research on the Council and its communities. Most immediately, as an internationally recognised ‘eco-city’, Waitakere City Council has adopted a guardianship role in relation to both the geographical area and the communities within it. This emphasis on guardianship is at the heart of the eco-city philosophy, in which the aspiration is to protect and preserve for the next generation. These principles inform the work that Council officers do, and they are very conscious of the need to minimise the risk to communities and Council of anything going wrong. This issue is of particular concern in communities where Council is sensitive to the need for relationship maintenance while not jeopardising ongoing trust. In addition, key sectors of Waitakere’s community, particularly Maori and Pacific Peoples, feel they have been over-researched in an exploitative manner, which seldom results in information or change beneficial to them. It was essential to ensure the research project gave, not took. In this context, the Council officials needed to have enough trust in the academics to support and assist them to be involved in ‘our’ place and with ‘our’ communities. At the beginning, there was a risk that they might be an external force with potentially

negative impacts that, in turn, might reflect negatively on the Council, and its established partnership processes, projects and networks. Hence the need to ensure the processes used for the research project built on and reinforced established local partnership concepts, and incorporated an initial period of trust building and negotiation with these communities.

At the same time, thinking within the Council has evolved over the last five years or so as the need to become more involved with researchers has been recognised. In particular, as Waitakere has been increasingly recognised as a city characterised by innovative community practices, there has been a greater consciousness of the need to rigorously document processes and practices in ways that might be helpful, both to ourselves and others. How can key principles be carried from one project to another? To other communities and Councils?

Many of the more innovative local efforts are now moving into a new phase where they are being challenged by issues around maintenance and sustainability. How can the initial enthusiasm, and the ethics and values on which this enthusiasm was based, be fostered on an ongoing basis? Tough governance issues have emerged as original personnel have left projects. Rigorous documentation and analysis is now seen as essential to the ongoing induction of new personnel, to assist the constant renewal process needed to sustain community based projects long term. The documentation required by the research process and project findings has the potential to offer much to both the Council and its communities.

As the project developed, the need for ‘risk management’, both within the Council and within various communities, was upper most in our minds. We were very aware of how the project was initially presented and represented in various public forums, but at the same time worked hard to ensure that there was some latitude for the research project to take its own shape as time went on. Most immediately, we worked hard on the issue of language. This involved coming to grips with the widely differing languages used by academics, the Council and communities, and ensuring that project material was presented in ways that all could understand and accept. At the local level, there were particularly demanding discussions in relation to the Maori and Pacific components of the project, wherein the pre-existing relationships of the researchers had to be reconciled with formal Council protocols and structures, and with the networks and structures set up by the communities. To this day, the Council finds itself working with different research models within the project when the preference would be for a more unified and coordinated approach, rather than the more disaggregated approach favoured by the academics. Finally, there are strong contrasts between the different institutional structures of the Council and the University. Indeed, to us there appears to be a contradiction between the apparently horizontal relationships between the academics and the rigid hierarchical structures through which the University is organised. This made it very difficult to challenge policies and processes - as was demonstrated by our efforts to question the university overheads policy when we found ourselves unable to even engage the University in considering the possibility that things could be different.

Research Agreements

While research partnerships might be at the cutting edge of social policy research and evaluation, the question remains of how we formalise these new ways of working.

We do not think there is a single answer to this question. As we have discussed, even within our own project, we have found there are a wide range of different views as to the formality of the structures required. Research partnerships can be variously interpreted as consultation, as a loose alliance of local interests, or as more formal alliances.

In the case of the research partnership with Waitakere City Council, the solution was to develop a Memorandum of Understanding - in the form of a formal Research Agreement - between the University of Auckland and the Council. The emphasis on contractual instruments in contemporary governmental processes is a well recognised feature of the New Zealand political landscape. We begin by underlining the point that while the Research Agreement is a formal legal document, it is not understood as a contract by the two parties. On the contrary, it is an explicit rejection of the top down approaches that characterised 'competitive contractualism'. At best, it might be seen as a 'relational contract' (Martin 1995) in which both the parties have a continuing investment. As a formal statement of commitment, the Research Agreement exemplifies the invention of new socio-legal structures that are more appropriate to the distinctive goals of local partnerships (Walsh, Craig and McCafferty 1998).

The prototype for the document was developed by Waitakere City Council when they facilitated the set up of the inter-agency Ranui Action Project. This was one of the

seven ‘Stronger Communities Action Fund’ pilots involving efforts to devolve funding from CYFS (the central government funding agency) to Waitakere City Council and ultimately, to the Ranui community itself. The development of the initial site agreement was an attempt to establish a three-way partnership between the relevant stakeholders, rather than a more traditional top-down contract. While the original contract drafts from Wellington reflected the institutionalised approach, an intensive period of discussion and negotiation was successful in replacing the initial draft with an entirely new document. Key innovations included:

- An explicit statement of the background to the project and the aspirations of each of the parties to the agreement
- Development of a series of partnering principles such as ‘act honestly and in good faith’; ‘recognise each other’s responsibilities to stakeholders’ and ‘work in a co-operative and constructive manner’.
- Definition of accountabilities as *mutual* accountabilities, rather than one-way.
- Detailed definition of the roles and responsibilities of the community, the Council and CYFS.
- Risk management and dispute resolution procedures based on trust, and able to be initiated by any party.

Central to the Ranui agreement was that the process of negotiation itself led to a depth of mutual understanding which has continued to benefit the Project.

These innovations proved a valuable model for the content of the Research Agreement between the University of Auckland and Waitakere City Council. Such innovations are characteristic of the new emphasis on relationships that now characterises the social sector more generally. In developing the Research

Agreement, the aim was to specify the aspirations of the research partners and the content of the relationships between them. Values, relationships, and trust are of the essence. At the same time, the document deals with tough issues around resourcing, work allocation and intellectual property and has been approved by both institution's lawyers. In developing the Research Agreement, we also 'learned by doing'. There was a practical engagement and joint problem solving between the partners, rather than adversarial tradeoffs between vested interests (although there were also moments of the latter!). As issues were discussed and worked through, this built goodwill. Moreover, an integral part of the understanding developed through the process of developing the document is that it will require regular revisiting and revision.

Through the Research Agreement, Waitakere City Council exercised a considerable degree of influence over the framing of those aspects of the project relevant to their concerns, as well as ensuring local discretion over a relatively significant pool of resources. However, just as the rigid institutional policies of the university had taken the Council officials aback, so too the requirement to obtain a mandate from the elected politicians before proceeding with a research project that involved working with appointed officials, took the academics aback. Throughout the process of developing the Research Agreement, we all grappled with the boundary between what is part of the research project and what is 'council business' or 'community concerns'. There were also ongoing tensions around the different time horizons of academic vs. policy and community demands. The long term and sometimes, nebulous nature of academic enquiry, can be frustrating for those concerned with more immediate forms of social change. Equally, for academics, the perception that they can provide quick solutions and answers to seemingly intractable problems can be daunting. Last but

not least, as academics we were very aware of the need to retain a critical perspective while working in collaboration. How, and in what ways, can we ensure that a critical engagement is sustained, even as we work together?

These issues are now being worked through on a more detailed basis by the researchers involved, as the University tries very hard to be a 'critical friend' to Council and the many local agencies involved in collaborative work. Dr David Craig and Ms Megan Courtney are now working closely together, and other members of the research team are also beginning the process of framing sectorally based research relationships² as the project continues to move forward. By all accounts, it appears that the intellectual and political rewards of the research partnership to date have been great. All parties recognise that the relationship building is ongoing, that it will require patience and good will, and that the University and the Council will continue to learn about our respective institutional and professional cultures. At this stage, it looks highly likely that the formal partnership will be maintained for the duration of the project.

We should note, however, that Research Agreements are not a universal solution to the question of research partnerships. From our experience, it seems that a formal document and process will only work when there are clearly identifiable (institutional?) partners. More significantly, it has been argued that formal arrangements such as that established with Waitakere City Council are not appropriate in the context of the Pacific components of this project, where there are already well developed relationships between the researchers and the communities involved. This

² These include not only the Maori and Pacific components mentioned earlier, but also safety and environment.

issue remains live, and discussions around the role of Waitakere City Council's partner organisation, the Pacific Islands Advisory Board, in the research are continuing. Thus, the formal partnership needs to be balanced with the less formal partnerships that characterise some components of the project, and the various components of the project need to manage the tightrope between inter-connection and autonomy.

What have we learned?

It is now over a year since we first received notification that the research project could go ahead. What are our conclusions? It is quite clear that the term 'partnership' – both in research and policy terms - is overburdened with meaning. There is little, if any, general consensus as to what a partnership approach to research might or should look like. As will be apparent from the different components of this project, the language of partnership can variously refer to a structure, policy or strategy.

Moreover, the flurry of partnership and collaboration rhetoric in both the policy and research arenas are not yet being matched by reform of structures and programmes.

There are important questions about the appropriateness of existing socio-legal structures to the distinctive goals of partnership. There are a variety of new pressures and expectations that will be manifest in ongoing struggles over resources, services, benefits and values. Similarly there is the important issue of multiple expectations, and the need to consider carefully exactly what can be delivered.

Finally, as we have worked on this paper, we have been struck by how many of the observations we thought were specific to our attempts to develop a research project in partnership, actually apply to local partnerships more generally. Issues such as co-

ordination, fragmented management structures, and organisational design have been identified internationally as issues government departments will have to grapple with if they are also to support local partnerships (see, for example, Walsh, Crag and McCafferty 1998). In many ways, partnership remains a problematic concept that may in practice always remain contingent . Perhaps the best way forward is to think about partnership as a process; ‘the process of partnering’, rather than a ‘thing’ that happens at a particular point in time and is subsequently institutionalised. This may provide a helpful focus on the principles behind efforts to undertake partnerships, the barriers to doing them, and the quality of effort required to achieve an effective process. Finally, there is always a risk that the process becomes an end in itself. Thus, while the potential for partnership is being refined and developed in countless arenas, the possibility of a definitive model that is available for widespread replication could remain an ideal whose time may never come.

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