



Foundation North: Centering Indigenous concepts and building cultural capability

Foundation North kaupapa

Foundation North is one of twelve community trusts in Aotearoa New Zealand, providing grant funding and other support to community organisations operating in the Auckland and Northland regions. Through its grants, the foundation invested approximately \$52 million into its region's communities in the financial year ending 2022.

Foundation North's vision is 'enhanced lives', which it aims to achieve through four strategic focus areas of hāpai te ōritetanga (increased equity), whakauru mai (social inclusion), whakahou taiao (regenerative environment), and hāpori awhina (community support). Across these focus areas, community priorities are identified that include Tangata Whenua, Pacific Peoples, communities of South Auckland, communities of Te Tai Tokerau (Northland), children and young people, new migrants, former refugees, people living with a disability, and rainbow communities.

Foundation North also prioritises support for initiatives, actions, and activities that focus on increasing understanding and giving effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi; as well as mitigation and adaptation to the threats posed by climate change.

Grant funding is distributed through a range of channels including Quick Response Grants, Community Funding, and more proactive Impact Funding. This story is focused on Foundation North's Gulf Innovation Fund Together (GIFT) initiative, and its influence on the foundation's wider practice.

Whakapapa – the journey of centring mauri within GIFT

The GIFT initiative was developed in 2016 in response to increasing evidence that the health of Tikapa Moana Te Moananui-ā-Toi (Hauraki Gulf) was in decline. Research and kōrero with iwi, Māori, and other stakeholders supported the idea of a bold, sustained, and innovative approach, and those designing the new fund saw an opportunity to place the Māori concept of mauri at the centre.

A separately branded GIFT fund, with an initial \$5 million over five years, enabled a small team within Foundation North to develop a fluid, nimble, and collaborative funding mechanism to seed experimental initiatives, scale projects shown to have potential, and develop initiatives looking to effect systemic change. GIFT-funded projects also received capacity and evaluation support from the Centre

for Social Impact. A total of \$11 million has now been granted via GIFT.

The ‘seed, scale, and system’ approach taken with GIFT built on practice and learning developed through previous Foundation North venture philanthropy funding models – such as the Māori and Pacific Education Initiative (launched 2006) and Catalysts for Change (launched 2013) – which had experimented in the spaces of high-trust partnerships, multi-year funding, capability development, and funding of innovation. Kim Collins, Foundation North’s former GIFT Project Manager, reflects that GIFT was established with a distinct goal of trying to achieve impact both by funding innovation and adopting innovative philanthropic practices.

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In its early years, GIFT attracted requests from applicants normally excluded from the foundation’s usual funding criteria – such as individuals, small companies, and academic researchers. Foundation North appointed both a science advisor and a mātauranga Māori advisor to the board as part of GIFT; and also began exploring working with mauri following conversations with Dr Kepa Morgan around using his mauri-o-meter as an evaluation framework. Kim explains that Foundation North grappled for some time with how to weave mauri into GIFT’s intent and practice. “We knew we couldn’t determine what mauri looked like, and that it needed to come from the perspective of whoever was doing the work”.

What mauri looked like in practice for GIFT took time to emerge. Kim reflects that the ‘penny

drop moment’ for her about the practices needed within GIFT to work effectively with mauri was hearing Teina Boasa-Dean speak at a GIFT-convened wānanga about mauri. “She talked about mauri coming through whakapapa and being a birth right for tangata whenua. It became clear to me then that GIFT had to prioritise tangata whenua-led applications or genuine treaty-based partnerships, because tangata whenua had to be included in the conversation if we were looking at the restoration of mauri”. Kim highlights that Rosie Nathan (Engagement Advisor – Northland) coming on board with GIFT was another turning point. “Rosie asked key questions about our understanding of mauri” in a way that gently challenged and strengthened GIFT’s approach.

Around year three of the initiative, this journey led to a shift in emphasis, where the GIFT team adapted its ways of working to be more culturally responsive and initiatives led by tangata whenua became a distinct priority. Mātauranga Māori practices and approaches were recognised, valued, and implemented, and the GIFT network’s understanding of mauri was deepened through wānanga with Te Kaa.

How The Philanthropic Landscape key practices present in the work of Foundation North

The most recent GIFT report shares learning about the impact of the initiative over a five-year period, including a suite of principles for working with restoring mauri, and how these show up in practice.

Rosie Nathan highlights that a key approach for GIFT was that “we took humans out of the centre, and we placed te taiao, mauri – the tangible and intangible – in the centre instead”. Kim adds that, what this meant, was that “people had to bring a new way of being,

including ourselves”. These new ways of being centred firmly on authentic relationships with tangata whenua.

Rosie reflects that at the beginning of GIFT, “there were challenges in how the organisation held relationships with tangata whenua and Māori”. Overcoming this was a matter of working with the team, and “sharing alternative ways of being with Māori”. One of the key challenges that needed to be addressed was speaking with tangata whenua about what the ‘innovation’ sought through GIFT meant to Foundation North. “We had to determine how we kōrero to innovation – what does that mean to Foundation North. We needed to be tika about that [...] and create a safe space for dialogue about that with tangata whenua and admit that we were learning”.

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It was critical that the foundation sought to engage with tangata whenua in a way that was underpinned by values that “aligned to tikanga, to Māori, to mauri, the creation story – all of those kaupapa”. Also important was the openness of Foundation North’s non-Māori staff to learn and explore how to work effectively with tangata whenua. The humility of the team’s approach is visible and demonstrably enabling of the fundamental shifts in practice across the wider organisation. Rosie also worked with the team to create guidelines for all of Foundation North’s future engagement with Māori.

Through their involvement in GIFT, Rosie observed a strengthened commitment from all GIFT kaikōkiri to weaving mātauranga Māori into their practice and to understand that

“whenever they engaged with Māori that there is a story in the room, a whakapapa that they needed to learn about [...] including Te Tiriti o Waitangi”. Kim highlights that GIFT’s tangata Tiriti organisations were starting to plan for and resource engagement with tangata whenua in their budgets and strategies. There was also a distinct shift towards “letting go of the outcome, and focusing on the relationship, [understanding that] marine regeneration that doesn’t address mana whenua’s cultural needs isn’t acceptable”. This has also created the conditions for enduring relationships and collaboration across the GIFT partners.

GIFT’s remit as a discrete innovation fund created space for deep practice development in relation to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and partnerships with tangata whenua. In many ways, this space was necessary to enabling internal readiness within the wider organisation to embark on a journey of development around Te Tiriti. Progress here is clear, with trustees now setting a clear commitment to Te Tiriti as a pou for supporting the foundation’s strategic focus areas.

Another key practice within GIFT was a deep focus on evaluation and learning. Centre for Social Impact researcher and evaluator Rachael Trotman walked alongside the GIFT team from the fund’s inception, “challenging, ratifying, stretching, and enquiring”. As the GIFT initiative moves into a space of greater maturity, this learning about systems change practice has shown Kim that “naming the systems that aren’t working, and facilitating the bringing together of groups to explore why these systems aren’t working” is an important practice. Shifting systemic issues takes an ecosystem approach. For Rosie, a focus on learning is critical because systems change work is “a long game and something we might not see the results of, but that we have the privilege of supporting”.