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Catalysts for collaboration: Antecedents and potential benefits of non-profits working together

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: The non-profit sector in Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa), primarily comprising smaller organisations (with 1–20 employees), faces unique challenges exacerbated by colonial and neoliberal funding models. The scope of this article does not allow for a critique of the neoliberal context but instead focuses on networking pragmatically within a neoliberal, competitive funding system. Scholarly literature often emphasises larger non-profits in contexts like the USA, limiting its applicability to Aotearoa's smaller entities. While a large proportion of the scholarly literature presents advice to advance the work of non-profit organisations generally, evidence on smaller non-profits is scarce, especially concerning what it means to broach collaboration effectively in such contexts. In this article, inter-organisational collaboration is proposed as a potential solution for smaller non-profits.

METHODS: Driven out of a small, exploratory graduate study, this article presents a strong platform for future research. The findings are based on a literature review supported by semi-structured interviews with six sector leaders in Aotearoa to explore their perspectives on the benefits of inter-organisational collaboration amongst small non-profits.

FINDINGS: Findings suggest that collaboration among small non-profits can advance peer support resource sharing, enable mutual accountability, and even encourage critical examination of colonial legacies to make progress on their journey as Te Tiriti o Waitangi partners. However, the authors argue that a collaborative and efficient non-profit sector will not emerge under current funding models in Aotearoa.

CONCLUSIONS: Sector leaders and funders are urged to recognise the significance of relationships and use these findings to prioritise collaborative practices in their work.

Keywords: Non-profit, philanthropy, community organisations, collaboration, leadership, challenges

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This article outlines the potential for improved performance of the non-profit sector in Aotearoa New Zealand through increased levels of collaboration between small non-profit organisations. Small non-profits are of particular interest in Aotearoa, given they outnumber their larger non-profit counterparts by 10-1, a significantly greater proportion than in other countries (McLeod, 2017). Scholarly literature published over the last thirty years has attempted to describe the benefits derived from collaboration

between non-profits (Arya & Lin, 2007; Bunger, 2013; Gazley & Brudney, 2007; Gray & Wood, 1991). However, the dominance of organisational theories in the literature (Gazley & Guo, 2020) may have overlooked the fundamental importance of interpersonal relationships and peer support as vehicles for achieving these benefits.

A case for the benefits of non-profits working together is built by first providing a contextual overview of the scholarly literature on the definition of, antecedents to, and the potential benefits of, collaboration for non-profit organisations. Next, the qualitative findings from interviews with six key informants working in Aotearoa New Zealand's small non-profit sector further contribute foundational insights into benefits from inter-organisational collaborations. These findings highlight peer support, shared resources, and shared knowledge as the vehicles by which organisations become more effective, more focused on their purpose, and create additional opportunities to improve impact. Leaders of small non-profit organisations and those who fund them can use these findings to begin considering what meaningful pathways to collaboration might look like for their organisation with other small non-profits in the sector in the context of a neoliberal, competitive funding system.

Non-profit collaboration in Aotearoa New Zealand

A central concern is how collaboration is most usefully conceptualised. Gray's (1989) definition of collaboration includes a "process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited visions of what is possible" (p. 5). This definition implies an equitable, forward-moving process that members engage in. Other authors have adopted and adapted Gray's (1989) definition in the three decades since (Gazley, 2010; Guo & Acar, 2005; Kim & Peng, 2018; Thomson & Perry, 2006). However, Gazley and Guo's (2020) simplified definition of "a joint effort between organisations that share some mutual goal" (p. 5) is helpful for considering collaborations between non-profits. As conceptualised in this article, collaboration refers to a relationship freely entered into between non-profits within Aotearoa.

The non-profit sector in Aotearoa New Zealand has some unique characteristics that require consideration. Most studies on collaborative benefits have focused on larger non-profit organisations in countries such as the United States of America (USA), limiting their applicability to the greater proportion of smaller non-profits globally, including in Aotearoa. In this article, the term *small non-profit* refers to organisations with between 1 and 20 staff, a categorisation aligned with other studies on the sector that band organisations by the number of paid staff (Harrison, 2010; McLeod, 2017; Stats NZ–Tatauranga Aotearoa, 2020). The high proportion of small non-profits compared to other countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom (McLeod, 2017) contributes to a fragmented and uncoordinated sector. The lack of a coordinated approach to service delivery limits the effectiveness of non-profit organisations in achieving their purpose (Eschenfelder, 2011).

Further, these small volunteer-led non-profits are challenged to compete with larger non-profits that operate more corporately (Aimers & Walker, 2016). Collaboration offers a potential antidote to fragmented service delivery and competition with larger non-profits. However, research on collaboration and guidance provided to small non-profits must be tailored to their size and locale.

Organisations in Aotearoa's non-profit sector rely on philanthropic and government sectors to remain operational. Elliott and Haigh (2013) reminded us that New Zealand government's preference for contracting with non-profits was part of the neoliberal agenda

and that, by the late 1980s, non-profits were active in taking on service contracts from government. This has become an essential part of the delivery of state social services and has the well-known effect of fuelling competition between non-profits (Moore & Moore, 2015). The benefits of collaboration explored in this article can provide insights into the impact of decades of funding models that deprioritise—or even dissuade—collaborative approaches. While competition is embedded in current funding structures, collaboration is sometimes framed as a tool for efficiency rather than as a challenge to market-driven models. This paradox shapes how collaboration is perceived and resourced in Aotearoa's non-profit sector.

Antecedents required for collaboration

Antecedent conditions must be present within and between non-profits to collaborate successfully. Small non-profit organisations, with fewer resources at their disposal, might have lower collaborative capacity than their larger counterparts. This is supported by research that found larger organisations are more likely to collaborate than smaller ones (Bunger, 2013; Guo & Acar, 2005).

Non-profit leaders are critical to an organisation's collaborative capacity and must have the skills and knowledge to collaborate effectively. Goldman and Kahnweiler (2000) found that a leader possessing "flexibility, patience, understanding of others' viewpoints, sensitivity to diversity and a cooperative spirit" (p. 446) is essential. Later studies by Kim and Peng (2018), Thomson and Perry (2006), and Weiss et al. (2002) described the required skills of organisational leaders as *boundary-spanning*—behaviours that proactively bridge the boundaries between organisations. Mayan et al. (2020) noted the development of interpersonal relationships as a critical antecedent to collaboration. Staff who interact with one another through regular work inter-organisationally are likely to develop these relationships (Bunger, 2013). Organisations with overlapping characteristics—such as geography and problem domain—are most likely to interact regularly and develop these inter-organisational relationships (Kim & Peng, 2018; Thomson & Perry, 2006).

Committing organisational resources to collaborative outcomes often relies on trust in participants to overcome competition and the uncertainty of realising benefits (Bunger, 2013; Vangen & Huxham, 2003). Leaders develop a perception of trustworthiness in one another based on their interactions and the history of the problem domain in which they operate (Kegler et al., 2010). Trust is an important antecedent of collaboration that facilitates shared decision-making (Larue, 1995; Tsasis, 2009) and the sharing of information and resources in collaboration (Gray, 1989; Proulx et al., 2014; Thomson & Perry, 2006).

Building a compelling case on the benefits of collaboration

The non-profit, philanthropic and government sectors must have strong evidence of the benefits of collaboration to justify funding it. Literature to date has identified potential benefits from non-profits collaboration, but the strength of evidence is not yet sufficient. Benefits must be examined in the context of small non-profit organisations operating within Aotearoa to build a compelling case for the benefits of collaboration.

Arya and Lin (2007) and Cross et al. (2002) identified that non-profits might benefit from increased technical capacity, innovation capacity, and the flexibility to respond to changes. Improved quality of services, increased access to resources and knowledge, and greater access to information and opportunities for collaboration are other benefits that contribute to improved resilience of

organisations (AbouAssi et al., 2021; Tsasis, 2009). Improving reputation and growing opportunities for influence are also commonly found as collaboration benefits (Kim & Peng, 2018; Wood & Gray, 1991). Tsasis (2009) identified further benefits, including opportunities to secure additional funding, increased access to information, increased clout for advocacy, and opportunities for further collaboration. Some benefits might be transient and only available to organisations while they remain members of the collaboration. For example, Eschenfelder's (2011) case study of nine family centres beginning a collaboration in Florida, USA demonstrated that access to increased funding would not be available to organisations should they leave the collaboration.

Despite these 30 years of research illuminating the benefits of collaboration, the case for collaboration remains inadequate for the non-profit, philanthropic and government sectors alike to prioritise collaboration. Gazley and Guo (2020) went so far as to say, "We are unable to demonstrate clear and compelling evidence of the benefits . . . of working together" (p. 212) in their systemic review of the literature. Evaluating the benefits of collaboration is not easy, with Gilchrist (2019) noting the clumsiness of evaluating the relationships that are fundamental to many of the benefits of collaboration. The concept of peer support offers one avenue to understand the relational benefits of collaboration, with Eschenfelder (2011) finding that individuals within organisations enthusiastically offer support and training to one another when collaborating. This article draws upon Austin and Seitanidi's (2012) definition of collaborative value as "the transitory and enduring benefits . . . generated due to the interaction of the collaborators" (p. 728), identifying that both the transitory and enduring benefits resulting from interpersonal relationships must be considered when building a case for the benefits of collaboration.

Methods

This small, exploratory, qualitative study was conducted as part of a master's qualification and received ethical approval from the University of Auckland's Human Participant Ethics Committee. The study's overarching aim was to collect insights from leaders working in Aotearoa's non-profit sector to explore perspectives on the benefits of inter-organisational collaboration in the non-profit sector.

Participants were recruited through social media platforms, and an electronic invitation was shared to reach individuals working in non-profit sector organisations in Aotearoa. Recruitment was aimed at attracting sector leaders—those involved in the management or governance of an organisation, and staff members not involved in management but with long-term experience working in the non-profit sector. A total of six sector leaders from five organisations participated in the study. Four held organisational leadership roles. One was a researcher in a small non-profit and had a non-management role. One participant was an organisational leader, and the researcher was from a Kaupapa Māori organisation (i.e., an organisation leading with an Indigenous Māori worldview). All participants were assigned a pseudonym where quotes have been attributed. These six sector leaders represent a fraction of the 11,000 small non-profit organisations in Aotearoa New Zealand. Participation was voluntary and may not represent the views of all those working in small non-profit organisations. For example, only one organisation represented by participants was Kaupapa Māori. Greater representation of sector leaders working in Kaupapa Māori organisations would have enabled a deeper understanding of the cultural fit and implications of collaboration for Māori. Given that Covid-19 restraints have been lifted since the time these data were collected, it would be prudent for future researchers to attempt to expand

the number of participants and sample to provide a wider representation of the non-profit sector.

Given the constraints of a 1-year thesis and the context of stringent Covid-19 restrictions at the time of data collection, we secured interviews with six critical informants in Aotearoa New Zealand with experience in a non-profit collaboration. Interviews are a well-established data-collection method for researching collaboration between non-profits and were previously used in qualitative studies by Kegler et al. (2010) and Eschenfelder (2011). This qualitative method was chosen because quantitative methodologies were "less successful at measuring and analysing collaborative processes" (Gazley & Guo, 2020, p. 224). The findings comprise voices from those involved in the non-profit sector—key to advancing knowledge for non-profit leaders and something for which an exploratory qualitative approach is well suited (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Given the government-mandated restrictions at the time, semi-structured interviews were conducted via video conference. The interview schedule sought to understand the participants' organisation and current collaborations, how the collaboration began, the outcomes of collaboration, and what collaboration they would consider in the future.

As the researcher, the first author's position as an insider to the non-profit sector was essential to the research, allowing rapport with participants and exploring the nuances of organisations, relationships, and collaboration. The first author's subjectivity was also central to the thematic analysis approach used to analyse the interview transcripts, as prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Findings were developed thematically from the transcripts. A selection of findings is presented thematically with direct quotes from participants.

Findings: Benefits of working together

All participants discussed the benefits derived from their organisation's involvement in collaborations. This article focuses on one central theme, "Benefits of working together," and its six associated sub-themes:

1. Staff are more effective because of peer relationships.
2. Shared resources increase the effectiveness of organisations.
3. Sharing of knowledge through collaboration increases impact.
4. Collaboration creates opportunities for further collaboration.
5. Collaboration allows organisations to reduce administrative burdens and increase their focus on purpose.
6. Collaboration facilitates knowledge and application of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Some quotes have been edited with the permission of participants for brevity, clarity, and to maintain anonymity.

Staff are more effective because of peer relationships

Oriwa detailed the importance of peer relationships in collaboration:

> A huge part of my [role is] relationships with people; we've got [15]
>
> [members] here . . . I need to be on good terms and working well with a huge amount of people. (Oriwa)

Being on good terms and working well with others was an important part of collaboration. All participants discussed how staff benefited from the peer support available in collaboration. Oriwa linked this support to increased effectiveness, stating:

> What is brilliant for the professionals working here is relationships [with] all these other [members]. . . we've got

> a big open plan office, and people are communicating with each other getting advice . . . for management, it's actually really good to have that sort of peer support here. And to have some of those conversations be like, look, this is what I'm thinking about doing, are you doing this . . . in an office on your own, you can be pretty isolated. (Oriwa)

Advice, feedback, and peer support enabled staff to respond more effectively to the needs of walk-in clients. In this context, the collaboration increased the number of professionals working in the shared workspace and improved access to knowledge and skill development.

Additional and better peer support through collaboration was also viewed as benefiting organisation leaders (who may not have these opportunities otherwise) who could use these peers to discuss and share ideas. Unfortunately, leaders are more isolated in small non-profits and may have few options for collegial support outside collaboration. Participants gave examples of leaders working together to better support their staff. Atawhai, as the only staff member participant, gave this example of meeting with other organisation leaders to resolve an operational leadership challenge they were facing:

> Last year, I was overwhelmed. And we [met] and worked out the change of hours stuff. And that wasn't initiated by me that was initiated by them . . . they just wanted to support me better. (Atawhai)

Atawhai also discussed how they felt supported by multiple leaders in the collaboration when feeling overwhelmed.

Irirangi built on this sentiment by explaining why staff are more effective when working with people in multiple organisations:

> She can see that she's making a difference in two different spaces. So that's when she gets the reward from it. (Irirangi)

Irirangi connected working in multiple spaces to the increased satisfaction staff feel within their role.

Shared resources increase the effectiveness of organisations

Most participants discussed shared resources that made administration and programme delivery more effective. One participant provided a strong example by summarising the increased effectiveness of their service through sharing donated items:

> We get quite a lot of shared resources here from people who donate goods, donate kai [food] . . . we share a lot of those donations with each other so that we've got a big, shared food cupboard that if anyone's got any client who needs anything to help themselves. (Oriwa)

Kai and goods are donated to Oriwa's collaboration, creating a shared pool that any organisation can access to meet client needs. Irirangi provided another example of pooling resources by combining two part-time roles across organisations into a single, full-time role that attracted more highly skilled staff. The ability to draw on collaboration members' resources also allows organisations to respond to the unexpected; this is best described by Irirangi:

> There was a point where [other organisations'] printers were down. And I'm like, well, just use ours. (Irirangi)

Unexpected situations, such as printers being down, are navigated through collaboration, and how issues are navigated reflects the resilience capacity of an organisation, which contributes to the effectiveness of organisations.

Sharing of knowledge through collaboration increases impact

Four out of six participants discussed how knowledge was shared between organisations and the impact that resulted.

Atawhai discussed how knowledge of grants was shared between organisations:

> Knowledge of grants bounces off each organisation. For instance, [name redacted] Trust . . . came through . . . as a suggestion that [organisation A] . . . and I thought, hey, this would be a great fit for [organisation B] . . . So, I applied [for organisation B] and [was successful]. I was like, hey, the system's working. (Atawhai)

Atawhai's example demonstrates how knowledge of grants gained in one organisation benefitted another in the collaboration. Non-profit organisations require funding to achieve their purpose, so additional funding secured increases their impact. Organisation B may not have been aware of this additional funding opportunity had they not collaborated with Organisation A.

Hirini gave an example of how knowledge sharing increased impact in another way:

> Supporting those groups within your own [territorial authorities] out across the regions, because all of the [territorial authorities] have a different prioritisation for climate action and environmental work. (Hirini)

Hirini's collaboration shares knowledge on how to approach local territorial authorities for climate action and environmental work. Sharing the information about the prioritisation of issues increases each organisation's impact when working with authorities. Hirini went on to discuss other knowledge sharing, such as the creation of collective submissions on issues of importance. Other participants suggested that sharing knowledge increased impact as staff have access to greater knowledge and experience than organisations could access for them individually. Oriwa articulated a strong example:

> We have a work group called the practitioners group . . . [that] plan trainings throughout the year, that [members] raise what they're interested in… They also look at what agencies we have and go, you know, Community Law comes in does clinics here, let's get Community Law in, because I'd really like to know more about protection orders. (Oriwa)

Oriwa details a proactive approach to developing peer support through a practitioners' group, facilitating knowledge sharing in their collaboration where members identify their needs and training is available to all members' staff. Members may provide training on their specialist areas of knowledge.

Collaboration creates opportunities for further collaboration

All participants gave examples of additional opportunities to collaborate that arose through collaboration. Hirini highlighted the need to identify influencers in organisations:

> I think every community group . . . has key influencers. They're not necessarily the people in leadership positions. They can be a really enthusiastic volunteer, or, you know, it might be the youngest person, the oldest person, or the most beige looking person, but they're the driving force that keeps it moving along, and it's been a process of identifying who those people are. (Hirini)

Relationships developed with these key influencers created opportunities for collaboration, with participants describing those relationships as not limited to those with formal organisational leadership roles. Another participant discussed how collaboration allowed members to come together on more extensive initiatives:

> [The collaboration] brought us together a lot closer. And that gave us other opportunities to move forward with other things. I think like the [name redacted] initiative that we brought forward was

> because of [our existing collaboration]. (Irirangi)

Irirangi talked about a larger collaborative initiative that is progressing more quickly because of the collaboration. Oriwa gave this example:

> [Collaboration member's] office manager [is] about to retire. And so, they might look to engage [another collaboration member] to do [their office management] instead of employing someone else to do it. (Oriwa)

Oriwa detailed how their collaboration created the opportunity for additional collaboration on the retirement of an office manager. The opportunity would not have arisen without the existing collaboration in place. Oriwa gave a further example of data-sharing between organisations, a collaboration that took 4 years to establish and was only viable because of the existing collaboration. Collaboration creates opportunities for new, larger, and more complex collaborations.

Collaboration reduces administrative burdens and increases focus on purpose

Small non-profits have limited motivation and skills to complete mandatory administrative tasks. Hirini explained:

> It's a passion for having the hands in the dirt for planting trees, for weeding, for trapping pests, for protecting species . . . That's the thing that brings joy to life. The thing that doesn't bring joy to life is GST [Goods and Services Tax filing]. (Hirini)

Non-profit organisations are motivated by purpose. Administrative requirements such as accounting for GST offer little motivation to small non-profits. Hirini said that established, small non-profits may be reluctant to learn new tools such as Xero, an accounting software package to support administrative tasks. Irirangi offered an alternative solution:

> One of the possibilities is that they can [collaborate] with us . . . so they don't have to go through all that pain. (Irirangi)

Irirangi suggested that small non-profits view administrative requirements as painful, and that collaboration supports organisations to meet them. Hirini gave an example of how it works:

> They're all volunteers and they didn't have the structure set up for employment . . . So, we've employed the four staff . . . to meet the requirements of their [funding]. We administer that, we're the employer, we provide that administration and reporting. And they work with the staff to meet their goals and vision. (Hirini)

Hirini's organisation employs staff on behalf of a small, volunteer-led member organisation. The organisation is not required to establish structures for employing staff and administering and reporting on funding. The volunteers remain focused on the organisation's goals and vision—purpose—while gaining the benefits of paid staff.

Collaboration facilitates knowledge and application of Te Tiriti o Waitangi

All participants discussed the role of Te Tiriti o Waitangi in their work, which affirms tino rangatiratanga (i.e., self-determination) for Māori. Application of Te Tiriti o Waitangi challenges non-profits to uphold genuine partnership, share decision-making power, and support Māori-led solutions. One participant highlighted the desire for knowledge from members:

> Many of them really want to understand Māoridom, tikanga, Te Tiriti [o Waitangi] . . . they really need to understand Tangata Whenua . . . and the different cultural aspects . . . Sometimes it's just in the pub having a beer. Yeah, seriously.

> But that's how they get to how we think, how we feel. (Kamaka)

Kamaka, who is Tangata Whenua (i.e., a Māori person, one of the original inhabitants of Aotearoa), discussed how many members want to learn about Māoridom (i.e., the world of Māori), tikanga (i.e., customary Māori practices), and Te Tiriti o Waitangi and indicated that an understanding of how Tangata Whenua think and feel, is required. Knowledge may be best developed through having a beer at the pub, and collaboration creates opportunities for this kind of informal peer support.

Oriwa outlined a formal approach to developing knowledge:

> We have a . . . cultural advisor who works over the whole [collaboration]. [They have] cultural supervision with me . . . I see him each month, and we'll talk through things. He also runs quarterly cultural development training for any [collaboration member] who wants to come. And he will feedback things to me . . . any gripes or any things he thinks that aren't quite right or any improvements we can do. And he pops in once a month, and he's just available for people to have a kōrero [talk] with around anything. (Oriwa)

Cultural knowledge and practice are developed through a multifaceted approach in Oriwa's collaboration. Training and informal kōrero are available to all collaboration members with a cultural advisor. Oriwa received cultural supervision and feedback on improvements that the collaboration and its members could make in their practice. Small non-profits without skilled Tangata Whenua staff are unlikely to access this level of cultural support outside of organisational collaborations.

Hirini explained one reason their organisation collaborates:

> One of our strategic objectives is to deliver education . . . the deeper skills required to affect change such as, you know, we're working with [small] groups that are predominantly tauiwi [non-Māori] … on understanding Te Tiriti o Waitangi . . . in how that applies to their work. (Hirini)

Collaborating with small organisations on how to apply Te Tiriti o Waitangi in their work is a purpose of Hirini's organisation. They proactively develop the deeper skills required to affect change in predominantly tauiwi organisations, facilitating knowledge and understanding of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Discussion

These findings contribute insights into benefits from inter-organisational collaborations and highlight peer support, shared resources, and shared knowledge as vehicles for organisations to become more effective, more resilient, and more focused on their purpose and create additional opportunities to improve impacts. Participants also described the collaboration as having the potential to unlock new opportunities, such as the meaningful integration of Te Tiriti o Waitangi into the non-profit sector's work. The non-profit sector should promote the use and the potential realisation of benefits to prioritise cultivating antecedent conditions for collaboration in their work to increase impact so that philanthropic and government agents can recognise their influence and value the opportunities to be unlocked by fostering a collaborative non-profit sector.

Findings on the importance of interpersonal relationships as both antecedents to collaboration and the vehicle by which benefits were derived were pronounced in interviews with our participants. Organisational theories dominate scholarly literature (Gazley & Guo, 2020) and have contributed to minimising the importance of interpersonal relationships to collaboration and their benefits. However, Bunger (2013) posited that organisations where staff interact regularly and develop interpersonal

relationships are more likely to collaborate, while Mayan et al. (2020) described relationships as antecedents to collaboration. The predominant consideration of interpersonal relationships as antecedents to, rather than the vehicle from, which benefits are derived, limits the understanding of the benefits of collaboration.

Our small study makes a link between the interpersonal relationships of collaboration and the resulting benefits. Gilchrist (2019) noted the challenge of measuring interpersonal relationships, stating that it "rarely has tangible or attributable 'outputs' and, consequently, funders and managers often do not appreciate its value" (p. 185). However, findings in our study indicated that quality of services, access to resources and information, and opportunities for further collaboration arise from the interpersonal relationships that underpin collaboration. Unfortunately, collaboration is often positioned as a way for non-profits to meet funder expectations as it plays a role in trust-building and public accountability rather than necessarily driving systemic change (Greatbanks et al., 2010; Yang & Northcott, 2019). However, collaboration can also serve as a means of collective advocacy and resistance, offering a platform for non-profits to challenge the very systems that shape their funding constraints. This dual role raises critical questions: Does collaboration primarily reinforce funders' priorities, or can it create space for non-profits to push for structural change?

Staff and relationships between staff were described as the most significant resource for many small, non-profit organisations in our study— reinforcing the idea that collaboration is as much about interpersonal connections as it is about organisational strategy. This finding aligns with Austin and Seitanidi's (2012) argument that transitory benefits, such as peer support, play a key role in collaboration outcomes. Further research focused on the benefits of peer support may contribute to developing a stronger argument for collaborative efforts.

The findings in this study align with the scholarly literature on the increased resilience of those organisations participating in organisational collaborations. Support was found for previous work in the field on the improved quality of services, increased access to resources and knowledge, and greater access to information and opportunities for collaboration (AbouAssi et al., 2021; Arya & Lin, 2007; Cross et al., 2002; Tsasis, 2009). Increased resilience and quality of services are strong organisational benefits from collaboration that must be made more explicit to the non-profit sector.

Reducing the administrative burden of small non-profits is another finding relevant to organisations that has not been well explored in the scholarly literature. Bunger (2013) is the only author to explore the topic of administrative collaboration in depth—however, their focus is on large non-profit healthcare providers outside of Aotearoa New Zealand. Small, volunteer-led organisations are present worldwide, but the findings presented in this study are particularly relevant in Aotearoa, where they outnumber larger organisations by 10–1 (McLeod, 2017). Small organisations are also more likely to need support to collaborate than larger organisations (Kim & Peng, 2018). Findings in this study on the benefits of collaboration for small organisations support the need for non-profit leaders to prioritise organisational resources and seek funding support to collaborate. This recognition of the potential benefits of collaboration has significant potential to lift the efficacy of the non-profit sector.

The role of collaboration in facilitating knowledge and application of Te Tiriti o Waitangi in non-profits locates this study uniquely in Aotearoa New Zealand. Participants described collaboration as a mechanism for tauiwi organisations to hold each other accountable for applying Te Tiriti o Waitangi in their work, many of whom may not pursue this knowledge otherwise. This suggests that collaboration

is an effective way to reduce the non-profit sector's role in the systematic oppression of Māori (Newcombe & Amundsen, 2022). Since this study was conducted, political developments have reinforced the concerns participants raised about systemic barriers to collaboration with Māori. Some spoke about the role of collaboration in holding non-profits accountable to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and ensuring Māori-led approaches were valued. Yet, these efforts exist in a shifting political landscape. The introduction of the Treaty Principles Bill (New Zealand Ministry of Justice, 2024), which sought to redefine the principles of Te Tiriti, threatened to directly undermine Māori self-determination. The Local Government (Electoral Legislation and Māori Wards and Māori Constituencies) Amendment Act 2024 (New Zealand Government, 2024) reinstates referenda requirements for Māori wards, reversing previous steps toward greater Māori representation in local government. These shifts add weight to participants' concerns that non-profit collaboration is shaped by forces beyond the sector itself, limiting the extent to which it can be a tool for structural change. Previous studies have researched the role of collaboration in strengthening the agency of Indigenous organisations (Abel & Gillespie, 2015; Bradshaw, 2000). However, they have not investigated the decolonisation effects on mainstream organisations. These continuing barriers mentioned in our study reflect longstanding structural inequalities that make meaningful collaborations in a bi-cultural context challenging. Our findings suggests that future research in this area would be relevant for non-profits working in other colonial contexts, including areas of North and South America, Australia, Africa, Asia, and parts of Europe, which seek to honour treaties with Indigenous populations.

Unlocking the significant potential of collaboration requires the support of the philanthropic and government sectors. Mayan et al. (2020) noted that unfortunately funders generally do not support the necessary time and effort to establish interpersonal relationships with the philanthropic sector in Aotearoa following the government's shift towards the contracting for outcomes model adopted from the late 1980s. While informal networking plays a key role in developing collective action and partnerships, its importance is often overlooked within a neoliberal policy environment. Neoliberalism prioritises competition and measurable individual performance (Aimers & Walker, 2016), which can make governments hesitant to endorse collaborative approaches unless they align with efficiency goals (e.g., collaboration as a means of improving financial efficiency, reducing duplication of services, or streamlining administrative processes). Even so, informal networking—despite its role in fostering trust and long-term cooperation—remains underfunded and undervalued within this framework.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, Aimers and Walker (2016) lamented the 30 years of neoliberal policy and government contracting affecting small non-profit organisations with community relationships. Neoliberal policy has instead necessitated a focus on the relationship between non-profits and government agencies. This study has not attempted to define what sufficiently funding non-profit collaboration in Aotearoa would look like, nor analyse and critique the impact of neoliberal policy on the sector. However, Bunger (2013) advocated for proactive approaches to networking for non-profit leaders, while Gilcrist (2019) recommended that informal networking be recognised as important for developing collective action and partnerships.

It is worth noting the overlap between the benefits of collaboration and the desired outcomes stated by the philanthropic sector in Aotearoa New Zealand (Waititi et al., 2021). Interpersonal relationships underpin collaboration and its benefits. However, reinterpreting the benefits of collaboration as outcomes within the neoliberal context may strengthen the case for collaboration.

Reframing benefits within the neoliberal context would support funders to address their reluctance to fund relationship-building activities.

Implications and future directions

Our small study represents modest progress towards building a case to support non-profit collaboration, with further exploration and an expanded sample required to develop a stronger case. Future research should investigate how to foster the antecedents to collaboration, such as interpersonal relationships, and the role of peer support as the vehicle for deriving benefits from collaboration within Aotearoa New Zealand. Our study highlighted that current funding models prioritise competition, administrative efficiency, and contractual compliance over long-term, transformative collaboration. To enable meaningful collaboration, changes to how collaboration is resourced and structured are necessary.

This means moving beyond surface-level encouragement of partnerships and making concrete shifts in funding and contracting models. Our findings indicated that many small non-profits struggle with administrative burdens, particularly in managing contracts and reporting requirements. Instead of expecting small non-profits to duplicate administrative structures, funders and policymakers could explore pooled funding approaches, where organisations form collaborative funding bids with shared administration rather than competing individually.

Further implications include the role of collaboration in decolonising the non-profit sector. One-third of organisations in the philanthropic sector in Aotearoa have a strategy that prioritises the wellbeing of Māori (Philanthropy New Zealand, 2019), and enhancing collaboration in the non-profit sector is one approach that may support wellbeing for Māori. However, given the limited sample in this study, it will be important for future researchers to include more Māori participants and explore a research question around the impact of competitive funding models on Kaupapa Māori organisations. Internationally, findings might be used to springboard into exploring the importance of collaboration to effect broader change in colonised countries. Our study indicated a potential value in Western non-profit organisations collaborating to support and mutually ensure the development of competencies and knowledge necessary for applying treaties in a way that aligns with agreements made with Indigenous populations. Some participants spoke about collaborations creating opportunities for advocacy—raising the question of whether non-profits could collectively push for systemic changes to funding and policy structures.

Informal networking was identified as a key factor in building trust and enabling long-term collaboration, yet it remains underfunded and undervalued within current funding models. Non-profit leaders in Aotearoa New Zealand should prioritise building inter-sector trust by facilitating regular and meaningful interpersonal interactions among staff from different organisations. By establishing and working to maintain genuine relationships, organisations can better navigate the complexities of collaboration and enhance mutual accountability. Funding criteria could also explicitly recognise and support relationship-building efforts, ensuring that non-profits have the resources to cultivate collaboration over time rather than measuring outcomes only in narrow, short-term ways.

A collaborative and efficient non-profit sector will not emerge under current funding models in Aotearoa. Insufficient prioritisation of collaboration in the philanthropic and government sectors is not a neutral act, and Aotearoa New Zealand suffers from reduced effectiveness, resilience, and impact of non-profits on society. A review

of competitive funding models is needed. The philanthropic and government sectors should further consider and explore the benefits of collaboration for the non-profit sector to assess the potential efficiencies and impact lost to Aotearoa New Zealand by insufficient funding. Current funding models fuel competition between non-profits and erode the antecedents necessary for collaboration. Future research should explore how funding structures could better align with collaboration's advantages, particularly in reducing duplication of services, strengthening sector-wide resilience, and ensuring long-term sustainability. The potential to unlock opportunity within the non-profit sector is too great to ignore.

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Declaration of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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