

# **Making Work Pay: Policymakers Perspectives on ‘Working for Families’**

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keywords: social policy, whanau ora, poverty

## **Introduction**

Critical analysis of the effects of public policy, in particular, policy that will directly impact on Māori whānau and communities, is a fundamental contribution Māori social science researchers make to the academy. In this paper we present early findings from a three year research project, “Reducing inequalities: analysing the effect of Government policy on whānau ora”. The paper focuses on preliminary analysis of the first set of data collected, namely key informant interviews conducted with policy makers involved in the development of the Working for Families (WFF) policy, exploring their understandings of the policy and its implementation. Four key themes, emerging from the key informant interview data, are presented for discussion: the context for, and background to, the policy; perceptions of policy intent; views of the philosophical underpinnings; and policy implementation. The paper concludes by reflecting on the implications for Māori communities of this complex and multi-faceted policy, noting that increasing whānau knowledge about the policy, and its benefits, is crucial to the improvement of whānau wellbeing within our communities.

## **Background**

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the New Zealand government identified that a coordinated and collaborative effort on its part was required to reduce persistent social and economic inequalities between Māori and non-Māori (Ministry of Health, 2002a). These efforts were, until recently, conducted under the Reducing Inequalities Framework; a policy platform comprising a broad range of initiatives across the whole of government aimed at improving the social and economic wellbeing not only of Māori, but of Pacific Island and other disadvantaged populations (Office of the Minister for Social Development and Employment, 2003). The purpose of this research project is to determine whether the Working for Families policy, a key element of the broader Reducing Inequalities Framework, has contributed towards achieving the government’s stated goal in Māori health: whānau ora.

The government’s overall goal for Māori health, as outlined in the Māori Health Strategy He Korowai Oranga, is the achievement of whānau ora or Māori families

supported to achieve their maximum health and wellbeing (Ministry of Health, 2002b). Whānau ora is also a major vision for Māori, capturing both the sense of the collective and the relevant Māori view of health. However, measuring whānau ora and whānau ora outcomes, particularly in health, has proved both an analytical and practical problem, for researchers, policymakers and funders alike. Whānau ora as a concept, is now firmly entrenched in health. However, the establishment by Cabinet in June 2009 of the Taskforce on Whānau-Centred Initiatives (Turia, 2010), along with a budget appropriation in 2010 to support this initiative has consequently led to the adoption and use of the concept in the human and social service fields more widely.

This study pre-dates the creation of 2010 Taskforce on Whānau-Centred Initiatives and does not seek to examine or evaluate that policy. The origins of the study presented here derive from a Request for Research Proposals (RFP) released by the Health Research Council of New Zealand and the Foundation for Research Science and Technology. These two research funders specifically sought “whānau ora” research that would address multiple indicators of Māori social and health inequality; contribute to an improved understanding of the interrelated causes; and identify potential approaches to addressing these inequalities. In response, this study intends to contribute to our understanding of the impact of government policy on whānau ora by tracking Māori household economic and other social indicators over time and in relation to the introduction of the Working for Families (WFF) policy.

Working for Families was introduced in 2004 as a means of addressing a number of social policy goals. The policy’s objectives were to reduce child poverty; to improve the incomes of working families; to strengthen work incentives for unemployed parents; and to make it easier for families to access financial assistance (Johnson, 2005). Components of the policy include increasing family incomes, making work pay, assisting with childcare costs and more affordable housing for families (Ministry of Social Development, 2008). While the research team recognise evaluation of the WFF policy has been given consideration (Wehipeihana & Pipi, 2008; Bryson et al, 2007; Evans et al, 2007) to our knowledge this is the first time research is being undertaken which specifically investigates the links between WFF and whānau ora outcomes.

## **Methods**

The research design for the full, three-year study adopts a mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods (Cresswell, 2003). The study comprises four discrete data collection activities: interviews with key informants regarding the intent and expected target audience for the policy; identifying households in the longitudinal survey Te Hoe Nuku Roa (Te Hoe Nuku Roa Research Team, 1999) who qualify for the WFF; analysis of these households over time to assess how their whānau wellbeing has changed since the introduction of the policy; and interviews with a subset of these households to gather in-depth data on their understanding of the policy and its perceived effects on their whānau wellbeing.

The findings presented here are derived from the key informant interviews conducted between October 2009 and April 2010. The interviews were conducted following an

in-depth literature review and analysis of the WFF policy and played an important role in clarifying and further elucidating expectations and intended outcomes. Key informants included policymakers, (Ministers and policy officials), advocates and academics; participants who were either involved in the development and implementation of the WFF policy, or worked with those affected by the policy. In total ten face-to-face interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule (Bowling, 1997; Polit & Hungler, 1995, Crabtree & Miller, 1992) and of these ten participants, four identified as Māori.

Key informants were purposively selected after our initial review of the literature (including “grey literature” such as Cabinet papers and policy working papers). In determining who to interview, we targeted three “types” of informants: those who either had been, or were at the time of the interviews, involved in the development and implementation of the policy; those who had acted as advisers to the government as the policy was being formulated; and those who had acted in an advocacy role for the very people the policy sought to effect. Key informants therefore came from across the country, although, given our parameters, policy officials tended to be located in Wellington, and included both males and females.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed and a thematic analysis completed individually by the interviewers who conducted each interview. In a process termed “mahi a roopu” a team of four senior researchers then undertook a further stage of analysis and synthesis. In accordance with the mahi a roopu approach the team, as a group, reviewed all the transcripts and draft themes identified by the interviewers; analysed transcripts thematically against the interview schedules to draw out the key messages and analysed transcripts for new, emergent themes.

The mahi a roopu approach to qualitative data analysis and synthesis has a number of benefits: analysis is strengthened through the critical input of experienced Māori researchers as opposed to being produced by a sole research practitioner in isolation; authenticity, reliability and rigour are maintained by a number of researchers reviewing transcripts; and the merits of “outlying” themes can be discussed and considered. However there are also limitations to this method of analysis; the primary one being it is a particularly resource- and time- intensive method of analysis. In addition, the method requires a research environment where all views are treated with respect, where rigorous debate can occur, and where consensus can ultimately be achieved. In our research centre the perceived limitations of this method of analysis are mitigated by fully costing our time for this data analysis approach into project budgets and the existence of a “flat”, non-hierarchical working environment.

### **Limitations**

The findings reported here must be considered in light of the study’s more general limitations. The data is derived from a small group of highly educated key informants who each have intimate knowledge of the policy. Chosen specifically for this detailed and expert knowledge, the informants therefore represent a distinct sub-group of the population. It must also be noted that at this early stage of the project we have adopted the He Korowai Oranga definition of “whānau ora”. In the next phase of the research, the whānau interviews, a more sophisticated definition may be developed.

## Findings

### Background to the policy

In late 1999, the governing National Party was defeated. The Labour Party, then led by Helen Clark in coalition with Alliance led by Jim Anderton, formed the new government. There were significant expectations on the part of the electorate that the new government address increasing levels of child poverty and increase support for working families.

With the levels of poverty that have been left over from the 80's and 90's ... the argument was that a good number of families were in a situation where there simply wasn't enough money in the house and that they were somewhat trapped into a benefit because there was no incentive to move into work because you lost money, housing costs were too high, so there was a concern with that. And as people will know really for quite some time the New Zealand state had moved away from redistribution of wealth and compensation for having children. In other words, there was nothing in it to have children and ... so there was nothing in it for families really. So families, poverty, lack of income, lack of incentive, housing costs, it was that kind of back drop that lead us to say that we should try and do something about that situation. Key Informant 2

There was also a sense that the new Labour government had to win back the support of the country, overcome a great deal of voter mistrust and essentially "do something to restore a sense that Government could make a difference in your life ... positively" Key Informant 2.

The WFF policy was introduced against a backdrop of previous welfare reform that had been led out by a socially conservative government throughout much of the 1990s. These reforms included a strong emphasis on means testing and a limited role for the state. These earlier policies were regarded by some commentators as being discriminatory against the disadvantaged and vulnerable in society (McTaggart, 2005); a view that was echoed by at least one informant.

If you think of all the things that went the other way through the 1980s and 1990s, there was GST which is regressive against poor people, there was two tax cuts during the National's period in the 1990's, both of which favoured higher income groups. This package reversed that trend and for a one-off intervention, is quite historic. Key Informant 6

Informants noted the policy had been introduced during a period of economic upturn, low unemployment and a workforce shortage. Further, the policy's introduction benefited from a Minister with an understanding of the issues and a willingness to lead the policy.

We had a Minister that really understood ... he was a social scientist ... and that is fairly rare in Government because Ministers aren't necessarily trained for what they become Ministers of... and we had a Minister of

Finance who had been a Minister of Social Development or Social Welfare as it was then. Key Informant 6

### **Philosophical underpinnings**

Underpinning the WFF policy was a range of values including: work is good for society, people should work when they can, “everyone should be in work” (Key Informant 4) and “a dollar earned was actually a better dollar than a dollar of benefit income” (Key Informant 9). Other assumptions contributed to the approach adopted to address the social problems identified; assumptions such as the poor not knowing how to use money wisely “you give the poor money and it won’t make any difference because they don’t know how to use” (Key Informant 4) and dependency on the state being a “bad” thing as opposed to independence from state support, which was to be encouraged. This discourse was consistent in all of the key informant interviews.

I think there’s a stereotype view that says you give the poor money and it won’t make any difference because they don’t know how to use it and all that sort of stuff. It’s just this incredible fear of giving poor people enough money because then they might continue to enjoy their lifestyle. Key Informant 4

Well it creates dependence because where does this money come from? This money comes from tax payers and its tax payer money that’s gone to the state. So when you start then returning money in whatever form, to groups of people, you are creating welfare dependence. Key Informant 1

Children were considered a priority group and there was a belief, held by the architects of the policy that society had an overall responsibility to care for them. The idea of children being a collective responsibility may have supported the goal to get mothers returning to the workforce, including mothers caring for dependent children.

It’s a collective issue that people have kids and we want them all fed properly and clothed properly and housed properly and that’s what countries do. Key Informant 2

The child care stuff was done for two reasons ... to free women up to go back into the work force and there’s lots of accusations and finger pointing about that, and secondly it was done because of the evidence emerging about the power of early childhood education for quality education to actually equalise outcomes for children in terms of education and income. Key Informant 8

### **Policy intent**

The policy intent clearly spelt out in the Cabinet papers and confirmed by officials themselves was threefold “to ensure people got the assistance they were entitled to, improving income adequacy ... and making work pay.” (Key Informant 7).

So to be realistic it [the policy] set out to substantially reduce child poverty and it did that big time, it delivered and there’s just a heap of evidence ... it was, as I was saying before, the largest redistribution of income downwards in three decades. Key Informant 6

Wealth re-distribution however, was directed at those trying to work or in employment and consisted of incentives to enter the workforce and adequate supports to enable people to take on work. A deliberate and stepped approach was envisaged.

So step one, get their income up, and do it decisively, step two, create a bridge to work, step three, you know, try to provide a model of support which would ensure that people felt like they were been properly supported to go to work which meant things like childcare and good career advice and so on. Key Informant 2

### **Implementing the policy**

The development and implementation of the policy was strongly influenced by the socio-political context of the time. While initially crafted to include both beneficiaries and working families, the political risks inherent in including beneficiaries in the policy were deemed too great and resulted in this group eventually being excluded.

There was a lot of concern about whether Working for Families was a good idea because it had quite a large price tag, it applied to people that were beneficiaries. It applied to people in other words, who a lot of the population had built up a lot of hostility to. Key Informant 2

Only families with children were eligible for the benefits of the WFF policy. In talking about single people and couples without children one informant noted that these people “missed out badly” and that certain groups such as widows “have fallen through” what may be regarded as a “safety net.” Key Informant 10

The language used in conveying the concepts of the policy were also highly reflective of the socio-political context. The use of certain phrases as the policy was being developed ensured support for the policy from other politicians and government departments and made the policy more palatable to the wider voting public. However, as the policy was being implemented, so too, the language used to describe the policy evolved and changed.

It was called “family support”, “bridge to work”, all these kinds of things, so we had all our core messages were around these kinds of positive things that this would do ... but at one sweeping media conference it was changed to “tax credit” when it was expanded and that was because the Prime Minister felt that tax credit sounded, tax cut in fact ... sounded a whole lot better than talking about family support and return to work. Key Informant 2

### **Conclusion**

The key informant interviews were undertaken to explore and understand the intent of the policy, the target audience, the policy development context and barriers to implementation. The key informants all clearly agreed that the expectations held by the electorate to address child poverty required the then, newly formed Labour government, to be seen to be addressing the issue of child poverty. The

mechanisms the new government chose to employ for decreasing poverty levels included family support targeted at low and middle income families; and developing a work environment enabling of change. The government was perceived as committed to demonstrating that they could improve on previous government policies, and as having the strength of leadership and political will necessary for policy change. Our early findings indicate that the new government believed there was solid evidence within the electorate, and from officials and advisors, to support the interventions proposed.

Undertaking this first phase of data collection, has not only enabled the research team to gain a much greater understanding of the expectations and intended outcomes of the WFF policy, but also highlighted the need for additional Māori-focused research in the area. For example it is outside the scope of the current research to explore the impact on whānau of exclusion from the policy, as only those in receipt of the policy are being interviewed. The knowledge we have gained from this first phase of the study will now be used to inform the qualitative interviews with whānau to be undertaken by December 2010. The preliminary findings from the key informant already indicate that the policy's complexity could negatively impact its uptake by Māori whānau. It is therefore crucial that, in the course of undertaking this research, Māori whānau are made aware of the policy and the benefits it provides so that we maximise the policy's contribution to whānau, and indeed community, wellbeing more broadly.

## **Acknowledgements**

This project is funded by the Health Research Council and the Foundation for Research Science and Technology.

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