

A SHORT PRIMER

Whiria Ngā Ara

A shared architecture for understanding how social change happens — and practical tools to help investors, Iwi, communities and practitioners make better decisions about where effort and investment should go.

The problem worth solving

People and organisations working in social change are grappling with complex questions.

Are we actually shifting the dial?

How do we explain our impact so that funders can really see and value it?

Is this programme designed to create the kind of change we are hoping for?

Are we measuring the right things?

These are not simple questions, and most people working in this space are navigating them with unwavering commitment and limited tools.

Whiria Ngā Ara was developed in response to exactly these experiences, by people who have spent years working alongside Iwi, funders, practitioners and communities grappling with the same challenges. It does not claim to resolve them entirely. What it offers is a shared architecture for understanding how change happens, a suite of practical tools designed to help investors and practitioners make better decisions, and a more coherent way of evidencing and communicating impact.

Where Whiria Ngā Ara comes from

Whiria Ngā Ara was not developed from a single discipline or a single project. It emerged over nearly a decade through four distinct but connected strands of work, each contributing something the others could not provide alone.

The framework is theorised from practice. Its foundations are the accumulated knowledge of kaupapa Māori practitioners, the patterns observed across years of evaluation work, and the concrete demands of working alongside Iwi and communities on real investment and impact challenges. It connects to a range of disciplinary conversations including social determinants of health, systems thinking, Indigenous theories of self-determination and behavioural science. But these are conversation partners rather than foundations. They helped sharpen and articulate what

practice had already revealed. A programme of academic publications working through those disciplinary relationships is currently in development.

HE ARA WAIORA

Under the intellectual leadership of Ngā Pūkenga Māori, He Ara Waiora developed a foundational reconceptualisation of wellbeing — understanding flourishing as emerging through interconnected conditions that are causally related rather than simply co-occurring. That insight runs through the Whiria Ngā Ara architecture in a foundational way.

WHĀNAU ORA PRACTICE AND EVALUATION

A decade of evaluation work alongside Whānau Ora practitioners revealed that the most significant changes in whānau lives were preceded by shifts in belonging, agency, identity, aspiration and collective purpose that activated change across multiple domains simultaneously. Developing the language for this became one of the central tasks Whiria Ngā Ara addresses.

IMPACT STRATEGY WORK WITH IWI AND PHILANTHROPY

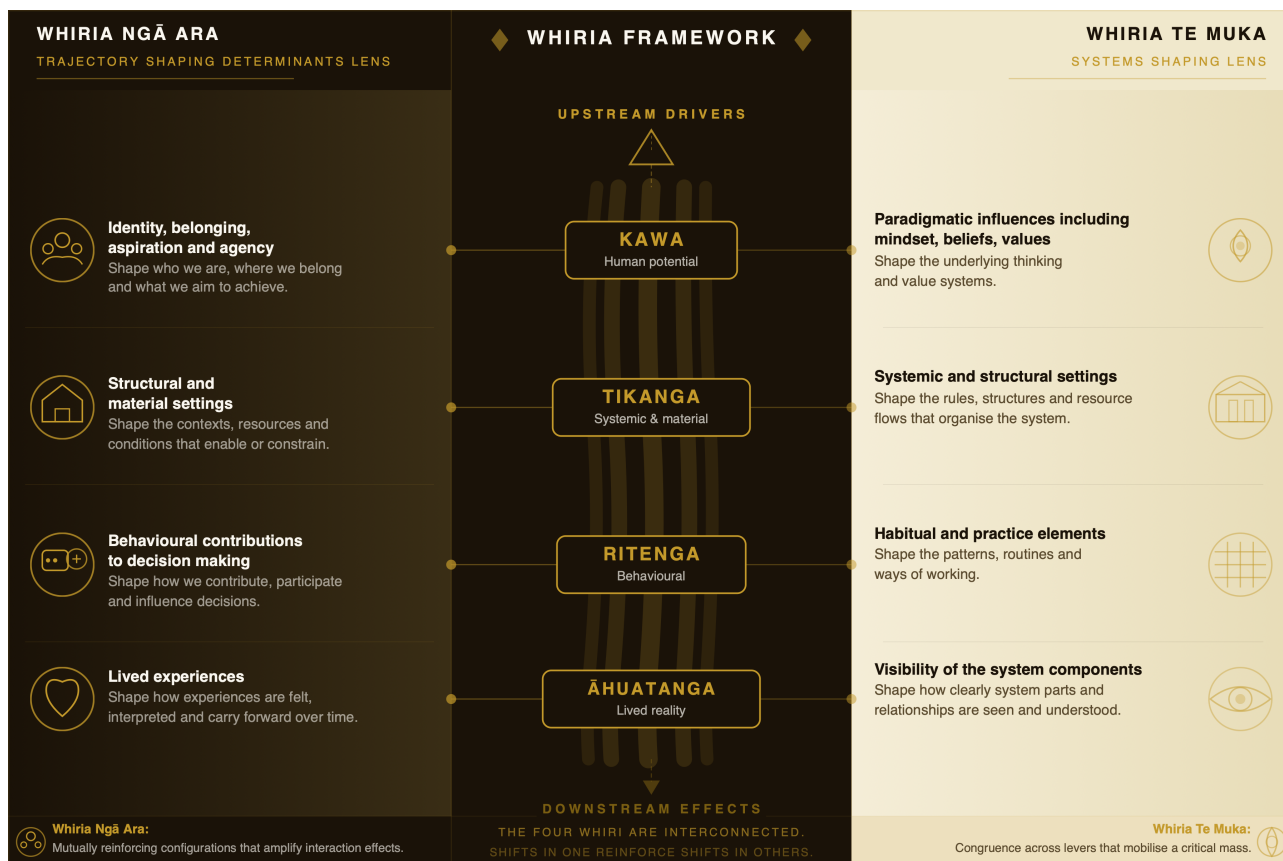
Working alongside iwi and philanthropic entities on their investment and impact strategies tested the developing architecture against the practical demands of real decision-making — shaping the framework toward the specificity that makes it genuinely useful.

HRC-FUNDED RESEARCH

A Health Research Council funded project exploring the causal mechanisms of kaupapa Māori wellbeing initiatives brought methodological rigour to the patterns that practice and evaluation had surfaced, strengthening the evidentiary basis for the framework's claims.

The Whiria Framework

Whiria Ngā Ara developed in parallel with Whiria Te Muka, a systems change framework built on the same four-part architecture of Kawa, Tikanga, Ritenga and Āhuetanga. Where Whiria Ngā Ara focuses on the determinants that shape individual and whānau trajectories, Whiria Te Muka focuses on the levers that shape the systems surrounding them. The two frameworks are complementary and together constitute the Whiria Framework. This primer focuses on Whiria Ngā Ara.



The diagram above shows the Whiria Framework as a whole. The left side shows Whiria Ngā Ara, the trajectory shaping lens. The right side shows Whiria Te Muka, the systems shaping lens. The four shared elements running through the centre — Kawa, Tikanga, Ritenga and Āhuatanga — appear in both frameworks but operate through different mechanisms depending on which lens you are looking through. The architecture section of this primer sets out each of these in detail as they apply to Whiria Ngā Ara.

The architecture: understanding how change happens

Whiria Ngā Ara organises the drivers of social impact into five determinant groups, structured along a continuum from upstream drivers to downstream lived effects. The architecture rests on a central proposition: to achieve social impact we need mutually reinforcing configurations of investment and intervention that amplify interaction effects across domains. Single interventions, however well-designed, rarely produce durable change on their own. What produces durable change is the right configuration of effort across all the determinants. Whiria Ngā Ara aims to make determining optimal configurations for community and context more tangible and practical.



WHIRIA NGĀ ARA

Determinants and levers of change

UPSTREAM
DRIVERS



KAWA

TRAJECTORY DETERMINANTS

Conditions that help activate and sustain trajectory change by shaping belonging, contribution, agency, collective purpose and social signalling.

LEVERS OF CHANGE

- Belonging-building environments
- Stretch roles and meaningful contribution
- Everyday agency and decision-making
- Collective purpose and obligation
- Narrative and social signalling



TIKANGA

SYSTEMIC & MATERIAL DETERMINANTS

Rules, institutions and operating environments, and material conditions that shape opportunities, experiences, stability and wellbeing.

SYSTEMIC DETERMINANTS

- Access and entry pathways
- Service and practice redesign
- Service integration and connected systems
- Product and service innovation
- Rules and resource settings

MATERIAL DETERMINANTS

- Housing security
- Essential needs security
- Labour market conditions
- Distributive settings and arrangements
- Place and environmental conditions



RITENGA

BEHAVIOURAL DETERMINANTS

Shape decisions and behavioural patterns that enable desired life course to be achieved.

LEVERS OF CHANGE

- Awareness and understanding
- Capability building
- Practice and routine development
- Applied participation and experience



ĀHUATANGA

LIVED REALITY DETERMINANTS

Immediate conditions and direct realities that shape stability, participation and wellbeing.

LEVERS OF CHANGE

- Immediate stabilisation, safety and relief
- Connectivity and participation conditions
- Prevention and protective interventions
- Treatment and recovery interventions

DOWNSTREAM
LIVED EFFECTS



Whiria Ngā Ara:

To achieve social impact we need mutually reinforcing configurations of investment and intervention that amplify interaction effects across domains.

Kawa

TRAJECTORY DETERMINANTS · UPSTREAM

Kawa sits at the most upstream point of the architecture. It names the conditions that help activate and sustain trajectory change: belonging, contribution, agency, collective purpose and social signalling.

These are not soft outcomes that appear after the real work is done. They are causal mechanisms that, when activated, trigger turning points in people's lives and amplify the gains produced by interventions at every other determinant level.

The empirical basis for this comes from a decade of Whānau Ora evaluation. What that work revealed, repeatedly, was that the most significant changes in whānau lives were preceded by shifts in how people understood what was possible for them and their whānau — a deepening sense of belonging and collective obligation, a restoration of agency — that then cascaded across health, housing, employment, education and relationships simultaneously.

Belonging-building environments · Stretch roles and meaningful contribution · Everyday agency and decision-making · Collective purpose and obligation · Narrative and social signalling

Tikanga

SYSTEMIC AND MATERIAL DETERMINANTS · MID-UPSTREAM

Tikanga is structured as two distinct sub-domains because while they are deeply related they operate through different mechanisms and require different investment responses.

SYSTEMIC DETERMINANTS

The rules, institutions and operating environments that shape what is accessible, possible and fair. Change at the systemic level requires working on policy, practice architecture and service design — often across organisational boundaries.

Access and entry pathways · Service and practice redesign · Service integration and connected systems · Product and service innovation · Rules and resource settings

MATERIAL DETERMINANTS

The concrete conditions that provide or withhold the foundations for dignity and wellbeing. Material instability is not a peripheral concern — insecurity and scarcity actively narrow the space for every other form of change.

Housing security · Essential needs security · Labour market conditions · Distributive settings and arrangements · Place and environmental conditions

Ritenga

BEHAVIOURAL DETERMINANTS · MID-DOWNSTREAM

Ritenga shapes decisions and behavioural patterns that enable a desired life course to be achieved. This is not about placing responsibility on individuals for their circumstances. It recognises that behaviour is patterned by context, relationships, norms, stress, opportunity and belief, and that supporting new patterns of action and participation often requires deliberate design.

Awareness and understanding · Capability building · Practice and routine development · Applied participation and experience

Āhukatanga

LIVED REALITY DETERMINANTS · DOWNSTREAM

Āhukatanga names the immediate conditions and direct realities that shape stability, participation and wellbeing. Relief and stabilisation at this level are not lesser forms of impact. They are often the ground from which everything else becomes possible — immediate safety and stability may be a necessary precondition for any upstream intervention to take hold.

Immediate stabilisation, safety and relief · Connectivity and participation conditions · Prevention and protective interventions · Treatment and recovery

The configuration is what matters

The most important thing to understand about the architecture is that no single determinant is more important than the others. Upstream does not mean more valuable. Downstream does not mean less significant.

What the evidence shows is that high-impact work requires intentional configuration of effort across determinants. A portfolio heavily weighted toward immediate stabilisation, without investment in the upstream conditions that activate trajectory change, is likely to produce relief without transformation. Whiria Ngā Ara makes the work of configuration visible for funders and practitioners alike. The supporting suite of tools are designed to make it actionable.

Putting the framework to work

The Whiria Ngā Ara architecture has been developed with application in mind. It is designed to be useful to funders and investors thinking about where to direct their resources, to practitioners designing programmes and interventions, and to anyone who needs to understand whether their work is creating the change they are hoping for. The diagram below shows how these three uses connect through the shared architecture.



MACRO USE · PORTFOLIO AND ECOSYSTEM TOOLS For funders and investors

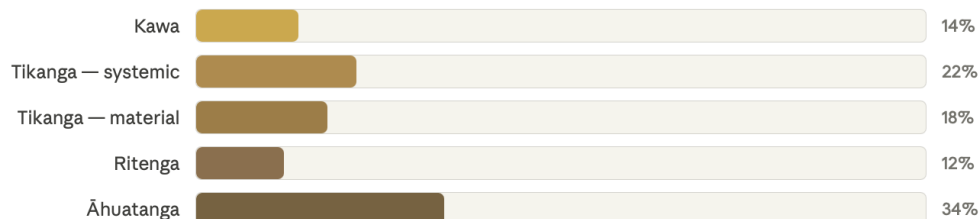
Two of the three Whiria Ngā Ara tools are designed to support investment decisions. The portfolio mapping tool makes visible how current investment is distributed across the determinant architecture: where spending is concentrated, where it is thin or absent, and how the overall portfolio is positioned across the upstream-to-downstream continuum. An illustrative output from the tool is depicted below, noting that further analytical capabilities are built into the tool:

PORTFOLIO MAPPING TOOL

Investment distribution — illustrative output

Illustrative

SPEND DISTRIBUTION ACROSS DETERMINANTS



PORTFOLIO SIGNALS

Upstream weighting

Low 14%

Stabilisation

High 34%

Systemic coverage

Moderate 22%

Behavioural gap

Present 12%



Pattern: Portfolio is weighted toward immediate stabilisation with limited upstream investment. Kawa levers — belonging, agency, identity — are largely absent. Consider whether complementary investment could activate trajectory change alongside existing stabilisation work.

The ecosystem mapping tool widens the lens, showing how investment and delivery across a place or kaupapa sits relative to the full landscape of effort, surfacing areas of duplication, gaps, and opportunities for complementarity that are almost impossible to see without a shared map. An illustrative output is depicted below:

ECOSYSTEM MAPPING TOOL

Reach and efficacy across the ecosystem — illustrative output

Illustrative

LEVER COVERAGE ACROSS THE ECOSYSTEM

LEVER	REACH	EFFICACY
Belonging environments	Med	High
Agency and decision-making	Low	Low
Housing security	Gap	Gap
Access pathways	High	Med
Immediate relief	High	High
Capability building	Med	Low

H High M Moderate L Low G Gap

ECOSYSTEM SIGNALS

- Critical gap: housing security**
No significant reach or efficacy despite likely constraining all other change in the ecosystem
- Strong foundation: immediate relief**
High reach and efficacy — opportunity to connect to upstream levers and amplify existing investment
- Coordination opportunity: agency**
Multiple actors working in this space with limited reach — potential for coordination or shared approach
- Amplification opportunity**
Belonging work is high efficacy but moderate reach — targeted investment could lift system-wide impact

Both tools are designed to bring something to the surface that is usually slippery: the relationship between what is being funded and what impact that configuration of investment is likely to produce. Making it visible creates a shared basis for sense-making — enabling decision makers to reason

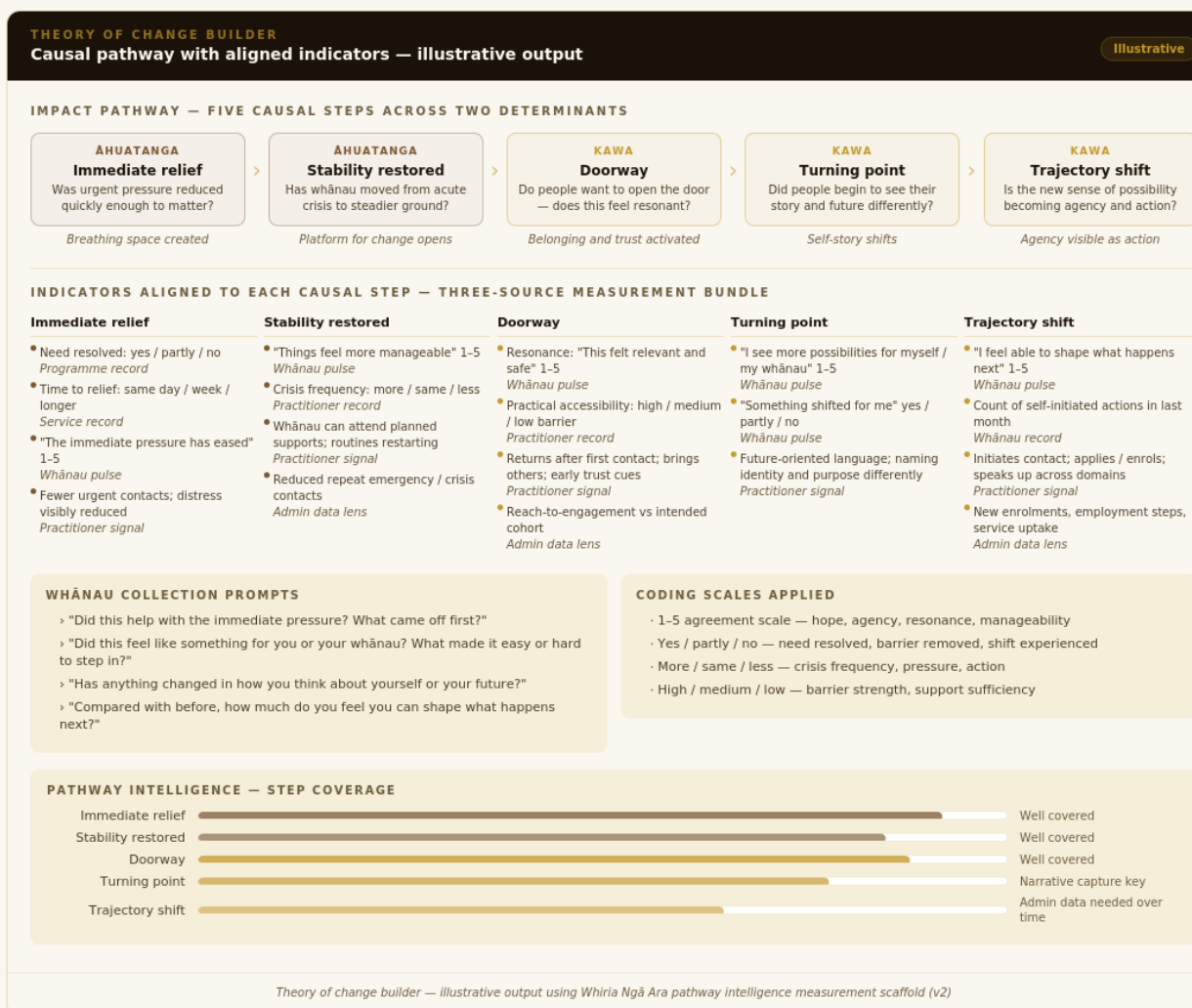
more clearly about what is, what could be different, and what adjustments would be most meaningful in their context.

MICRO USE · THEORY OF CHANGE TOOL

For practitioners and change agents

The theory of change tool supports practitioners in building causal logic for their programmes using the Whiria Ngā Ara impact pathways as a shared scaffold. Practitioners select and arrange causal steps from the pathway library, adapting them to their context. The tool then does something that is rarely done well: it aligns indicators and data collection methods directly to each causal step in the chain, producing a measurement framework that is grounded in the logic of how the programme expects change to unfold rather than bolted on afterward.

What this makes visible is the relationship between what a programme does and why it expects change to happen — and whether the evidence base supports that expectation. The tool makes the underlying causal assumptions explicit enough to be tested, debated and strengthened. An illustrative output from this tool is depicted below:



Measurement as a shared resource

The measurement framework produced through the theory of change tool is not only useful to practitioners. Because indicators are aligned to specific causal steps in the Whiria Ngā Ara impact pathways, the evidence they generate is legible across programmes and portfolios. Funders and investors can use that evidence to understand not just whether outcomes appeared, but whether the pathways expected to produce them were actually activated.

When programmes and portfolios use a shared causal architecture, measurement evidence accumulates rather than sitting in silos. Over time it builds a more honest and more useful picture of how impact is created — one that funders, investors, practitioners and communities can reason from together.

TOOLS AS DECISION SUPPORT

All three tools share a common purpose. They are **decision support tools** — designed to surface and give language to the principles and causal assumptions that ordinarily sit beneath the surface of investment and design conversations, rarely examined and often the source of people talking past each other. The analysis they produce is empirically founded, but the tools do not make decisions. What they do is create the conditions for better sense-making — so that decision makers at every level, working within their own values, strategies and context, can reason more clearly about what is happening, what is possible, and what their version of better looks like. The tools are freely available and are built so that none of your data enters our system to ensure data sovereignty remains with you.

Where Whiria Ngā Ara is being applied

The opportunities we have had to apply Whiria Ngā Ara alongside organisations doing important work have been formative for the framework itself. We are grateful for each of them.

Pou Tangata

We have been privileged to work alongside Pou Tangata on the challenge of whānau and tamariki experiencing poverty. That work has included facilitating a cross-sectoral Summit exploring solutions and scoping a portfolio mapping of government investment against the Whiria Ngā Ara determinants. Within this kaupapa, Whiria Ngā Ara serves as a way to operationalise Te Ora o Te Whānau — the aspiration that all whānau are thriving, culturally connected, living healthy lifestyles, and able to take ownership and responsibility for their own futures. Being trusted to contribute to work of this significance has deepened our understanding of what the framework needs to be able to do.

Hauora Māori Services Te Waipounamu

We have been commissioned by Hauora Māori Services Te Waipounamu to develop research and evidence-informed recommendations for the performance measurement and commissioning approach used for Hauora Māori outcomes. That engagement stretched the applied utility of Whiria Ngā Ara in ways that have strengthened the framework, and we valued it as something of a living laboratory for exploring how the components of an operating model interconnect. We are grateful for the trust that commission represented.

Auckland Co-Design Lab

We are grateful to be working alongside the Auckland Co-Design Lab on a first 2000 days initiative, where Whiria Ngā Ara is being used to inform approaches to data interpretation. This work is opening up important questions about how the framework can support sense-making in complex, multi-agency contexts, and we are learning from it.

The state of the work and how to engage

Whiria Ngā Ara is ready to be used. The determinant architecture, the impact pathways, and the applications described in this primer are sufficiently developed to be applied to real investment decisions, programme designs and measurement challenges. At the same time, the framework continues to evolve — through application, through the research programme currently underway, and through the relationships and partnerships that are shaping how it develops. We think that is as it should be. A framework that claims to be finished is probably not paying close enough attention.

AVAILABLE FROM JULY 2026

Three web app tools — portfolio mapping, ecosystem mapping, and theory of change building — freely available from the public launch.

PUBLICATIONS IN DEVELOPMENT

A suite of academic publications working through the conceptual, empirical and methodological foundations of the framework, to be released progressively.

We would genuinely welcome the chance to connect with people and organisations who find this work resonant. Whether you are a funder or investor thinking about portfolio discipline, a practitioner wanting stronger tools for design and measurement, an Iwi or community organisation exploring what Whiria Ngā Ara might offer, or a researcher interested in the questions the framework raises — we are interested in that conversation. Reach us through whiriangaara.co.nz