



Dr Rita Dionisio

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Embracing Indigenous knowledge for sustainable urban transformation

Research Objectives

Dr Rita Dionisio examines Indigenous-led philosophies and practices to improve the inclusivity of planning systems for socio-ecological wellbeing.

Detail

Bio

Dr Rita Dionisio is a senior lecturer in geography at the University of Waikato (Te Reo Māori: Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato). Her work focuses on the connections between urban communities and sustainable regeneration. Projects and interests focus on culturally led, socio-ecological approaches to collaborative planning to address systemic challenges at crossings with urban land, policy, and socio-cultural wellbeing.

Funding

- National Science Challenge 11 Building Better Homes Towns and Cities, Urban Wellbeing program (2020–2024)
- Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, Endeavour Program, Round (2017–2021)

Collaborators

- Professor Amanda Yates (Auckland University of Technology)
- Associate Professor Kelly Dombroski (Massey University)
- Professor Angus Macfarlane (University of Canterbury)
- Associate Professor Sonja Macfarlane (Massey University)
- Dr Melissa Derby (University of Waikato)
- Dr Dean Walker (formerly at the University of Canterbury)
- Te Tatau o Te Arawa
- Te Manatōpu o Haukāinga o Ōhinemutu
- The Geospatial Research Institute, University of Canterbury

References

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- Yates, A, Dombroski, K, Dionisio, R, (2023) Dialogues for wellbeing in an ecological emergency: Wellbeing-led governance frameworks and transformative Indigenous tools. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 13(2), 268–287. doi.org/10.1177/20438206221102957

Personal Response

What inspired you to conduct this work?

My key motivation for connecting urban geography and planning with local and Indigenous knowledge systems is centred on social justice in cities. If the perspectives of Indigenous peoples are celebrated and enhanced in cities, that can be a measure of social and cultural justice. My research is focused on understanding how we can get planning systems and policies to do so.

Similar movements are found around the world, with different Indigenous ways of knowing being introduced to modern governance structures. How do Māori traditions and practices with regard to climate action, urban transformation, and wellbeing differ from those of other Indigenous communities? What similarities do they share?

Mātauranga Māori is relatively well-preserved in comparison to Indigenous and traditional bodies of knowledge in other parts of the world. Like any living knowledge system, it is organic, iteratively evolving, context and place-sensitive with the potential to inform equitable urban adaptation.

Embracing Indigenous knowledge for sustainable urban transformation

Mainstream governance structures are rooted in Eurocentric approaches. At the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand, Dr Rita Dionisio studies culturally reflective, place-based approaches to improving and measuring socio-ecological wellbeing in the face of climate change and declining socio-economic conditions. Dionisio argues that Indigenous-led philosophies and practices offer the opportunity to decolonise urban governance and embrace collaborative planning and partnerships with cross-cultural perspectives.

Life on Earth is facing a crisis in the form of anthropogenic climate change and environmental degradation. The dominant discourses around this issue are grounded in Eurocentrism, with a focus on science/engineering-based solutions and the impacts on capitalist-based economic systems. However, there are alternative approaches, including to recognise Indigenous knowledge, which commonly shares closer connections with the environment than 'Westernised' societies. While emergent, there are notable, high-profile examples of alternative wellbeing-led governance. Bhutan famously measures Gross National Happiness as an alternative to the Gross Domestic Product. At a global level, the United Nations has incorporated wellbeing into its Sustainable Development Goals.

At the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand, Dr Rita Dionisio studies culturally reflective, place-based approaches to improving and measuring socio-ecological wellbeing. Alongside colleagues and collaborators, she argues that engaging with Indigenous-led philosophies, practices, and networks is a vital element when developing both community- and planetary-scale sustainability research initiatives. Dionisio's work connects to traditional ecological knowledge, like mātauranga Māori, to counter dominant approaches to urban planning, sustainability progress, climate action, and social transitions.

WELLBEING: A GLOBAL RIGHT

Dionisio argues that wellbeing is not simply something to be enjoyed by the wealthy; rather, it should be seen as a right bestowed upon every living thing, human and more. However, wellbeing around the world is under threat, largely

as a result of crises stemming from dominant global capitalist socio-economic structures, including the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation (eg, flooding, extreme weather, ground contamination, etc) and declining socio-economic conditions (eg, lack of affordable housing, declining mental health, increasing domestic violence, etc).

In a seminal work, entitled 'Dialogues for wellbeing in an ecological emergency', Dionisio and her colleagues discussed Indigenous understandings of holistic wellbeing and experimental research practices for urban wellbeing. The work presented a pluriversal (that is, accepting knowledge that is not universalising or colonising, and that encompasses multiple ways of knowing and being) and prefigurative (that is, 'performative acts of knowledge-making and activations that prefigure the kind of place and the wider world we want to live in'). This approach is centred on Indigenous Māori knowledge to spark debate toward justice and provide a platform for cross-cultural perspectives on urban governance.

The researchers argue that Indigenous-led philosophies and practices can offer the opportunity to radically transform urban governance systems by recentring decisions on local and Indigenous knowledge and embracing collaborative planning and partnerships. The He Awa Whiria concept provides vital methodological guidance for this type of research: meaning 'braided river', He Awa Whiria is a term representing the joining of multiple ways of knowing to provide a more holistic worldview. By ensuring that planning systems are 'culturally reflective and ethnically engaged', He Awa Whiria can facilitate the co-creation of pathways



Dionisio studies Indigenous understandings of holistic wellbeing and experimental research practices for urban wellbeing.

for tangible improvements to human, and more-than-human, experiences at the community level.

He Awa Whiria offers both sustainable tools for tackling issues arising from rapid social and environmental change but also facilitates Indigenous sovereignties and more equitable urban and environmental governance. As hoped, this work ignited academic debate, including published responses from other authors. Subsequently, Dionisio and her colleagues published a new article, 'Testing practices for testing times', offering a counter-response to further cultivate this debate.

TESTING PRACTICES FOR TESTING TIMES

In their rebuttal paper, Dionisio and her colleagues argue that in this relatively new approach to governance, albeit based on long-standing traditional knowledge, the key is 'giving things a go' in a cautious manner, implementing small acts of change to affect cumulative and sustainable change, community and urban resilience, and social sustainability and equity. They highlight the concept of an Indigenous 'compass' centred on holistic wellbeing, the Mauri ora compass, that can be used to guide experimental and iterative approaches.

For example, gradual changes to the language used in official publications and policies can be implemented to slowly test what works and what doesn't. They offer an example from Ōtautahi Christchurch, where a place-based version of the compass was used to guide the development of a public exhibition and book project. This project subsequently inspired similar initiatives in Rotorua and Wellington. The Mauri ora compass concept was disseminated via a local government conference, with interest from various groups around New Zealand and from the Doughnut Economics

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Action Lab, an international group that aims to turn alternative ideas into transformative action.

Dionisio highlights the fact that 'urban planning and transformation are never ethically neutral, but ethically negotiated and political'. In a practical example from Rotorua, Te Tatau o Te Arawa, a collaboration between Te Arawa (a confederation of Māori iwi [tribes] and hapū [sub-tribes]) and the Rotorua

Lakes Council, has developed a new vision for the management of ancestral lands, including urban Rotorua, via a 'pick-n-mix' approach to Māori-centred traditions. This approach comes at a time of acute housing crisis and an increase in severe weather events. In the coming years, small but incremental changes can be used to test research and governance practices in Rotorua and facilitate sustainable upgrades to the region's infrastructure.

With support from engaged academics and communities, Dionisio's work contributes to Indigenous urban governance by highlighting methods and approaches to give effect to the Treaty of Waitangi in planning systems and practices. This can guide inter-organisational

partnerships and the implementation of co-design methods to enhance the recognition of local and Indigenous values centred on holistic wellbeing, social cohesion, and equity. Through her work, Dionisio strives to emphasise that collaborative, creative, experimental, and incremental practices, centred on local and Indigenous knowledge, can significantly contribute to expanding wellbeing-led governance in times of socio-ecological upheaval.



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