Social Policy & Parliamentary Unit
Working for the eradication of poverty in New Zealand

Te Ope Whakaora

ENDING FOOD INSECURITY

What needs to be done now

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report joins the call for a values-led approach to food security and food systems in this country. Our nation exports enough food to feed 40 million people yet leaves more than a quarter of a million children going without sufficient food in this country. Action is needed now across all the dimensions of food security.

The commitment that no-one should go without food should be an uncontested political and social consensus, regardless of economic or political cycles. This recognises commitments made by successive governments that food security is a human right.

Food is more than just a commodity to be traded. Kai is a great connector; when people gather to share in food it is a part of building relationships with others, the land, environment, culture and history. This is not an idealistic or sentimental understanding of food, but one that reflects a clear analysis of the many dimensions of food security that need to be addressed in the day-to-day work of production, distribution and consumption of food and in the policy, planning and regulation of the food system.

Taking a solutions-based approach to the problem of food insecurity means recognising the urgency of meeting immediate and short-term needs, while wrestling with the longer-term issues.

The immediate crisis is that the rate of food insecurity among households with children almost doubled in the two years to June 2024 (most recent figures), with Pacific children and tamariki Māori being most affected. Food insecurity is a major factor in overall material hardship experienced by children, and the number of children in material hardship is rising again and in 2024 was higher than it was in 2018.

Eating a healthy diet has become more expensive. The price of low-cost healthy food has increased at a rate twice that of incomes in recent years. A lack of competition in the grocery sector has been identified by the Commerce Commission as a contributor to this. But it is likely to take a decade or more for another large supermarket operator to become established in this country.

Creating thriving, mana-centred local food systems with alternative smaller models of grocery and food enterprises offers the chance for immediate improvement in supply and affordability of food. Such enterprises exist already, and well-designed support through local and national food policy and funding could bring rapid change.

A new paradigm for our food system needs to be shaped ensuring that thriving local food systems exist together with the food export sector. A food security strategy and plan of action that puts local food security on an equal footing is also needed. Food policy is currently dominated by the priorities of international food trade policy, such as trade agreements and food export standards.

Food policy needs to be informed by a fully rounded understanding of social investment that takes account of the benefits of longer-term health, educational and other socio-economic benefits in food policy decisions. Diverse local food systems are more resilient in times of emergency and disaster, as well as being more responsive to local cultural and environmental needs.

The solutions proposed here focus on the experience of people on lower incomes, but what works for those with fewer resources works for all. Many of the actions proposed could start immediately. There is no time to waste.

A MAP OF SOLUTIONS

Continued funding is needed to scale up community initiatives, like the $1.5m Community Food Security Initiatives Fund provided by MSD that have funded projects aimed at increasing the amount of healthy, affordable food in low-income communities.

The Grocery Commissioner should become a Food Commissioner, with their purpose expanded to include local economic development, with a focus on small and medium enterprises rather than large corporate interests.

Implementing a plan to achieve mana-centred local food systems that acknowledge the wellbeing of people, livelihoods and communities in relationship with Papatūānuku, the planet.

Government hardship grants are currently inadequate to respond to short-term presenting need. Government needs to ensure that all have access to adequate income whether they are in employment or not.

Free lunches in schools needs to be embedded in our school system and widely available to all students potentially impacted by food insecurity.

Fund **national networks of food support and food rescue and coordination of food relief and distribution** that deliver ongoing and lasting and social benefit and disaster resilience across government budget cycles.

Develop a social investment plan for food security to support ongoing resourcing of food security-related work. It should be a baseline commitment in local government and central government, that incorporates the health, environmental and social wellbeing benefits of achieving food security and evaluates outcomes against a rounded vision for food security.

A **National Food Strategy is urgently needed** that upholds Te Tiriti and prioritises the health and wellbeing of people and the environment, alongside economic growth.

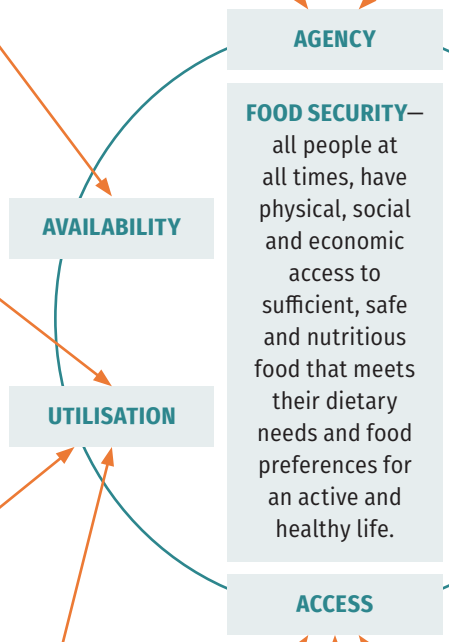
Combining both taxes on unhealthy food (eg, sugar taxes) and **reducing the cost of healthy food through targeted measures** such as tax reductions on healthy food could be a powerful combination of measures to impact food affordability and food security.

Strengthen Māori leadership across our food system at multiple levels. Effective food security solutions must actively recognise and restore the relationships between mana whenua and their traditional food landscapes.

Local advocacy needs to explore the tools available to local councils to plan and regulate for access to healthy and affordable food.

Healthy food environment by-laws enabled by amending the Local Government Act would help local government to take action to improve food environments such as local healthy food policies or limiting fast food density.

Ensuring every household has access to a liveable income whether from paid work or income support should not be seen as an expensive social policy 'nice to have', but rather as the cornerstone of demand in a thriving domestic food sector and base for a robust international food export sector.



INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity experienced by children has reached its highest levels in a decade. The shameful reality that our wealthy, food-producing country allows more than one in four children to miss out on sufficient food should be galvanising all in government and communities to respond. Not enough is being done to alleviate the current hardship and to bring about the systems change needed for our country to be a place where everyone is food secure.

Material hardship in families and the wider community is growing, and food hardship is a major contributor to overall material hardship. This paper explores six dimensions of food insecurity as identified by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO): Agency, Stability, Sustainability, Access, Availability and Utilisation, including addressing root causes of food insecurity such as inherent inequities experienced by Māori and Pacific households.

Our vision is for a (near) future where, in a food-secure Aotearoa, foodbanks are no longer needed as all have the food they need and are satisfied. The barriers to food security need to be understood and recommendations need to be focused on solutions—immediate steps that can be taken by government and local communities to reduce hardship, as well as medium- to long-term steps including a national food security strategy. Actions taken now will have immediate and lasting impacts on communities.

The Government Budget presented on 22 May 2025 marked a critical moment for food security in communities. The Government has committed to continue current funding to resource foodbanks and food rescue for another year through to June 2026. In total, $15 million has been committed to continue funding food security programmes through to 2026. While it is a relief that some funding will continue in the short term, the uncertainty remains around the highly constrained approach to future budgets beyond June 2026.

A focus on growing the economy alone does not address the unequal distribution of the economic benefits of that growth, which is the major driver of food insecurity and material hardship. Food insecurity is a completely solvable problem—if it is prioritised in policy decisions and resourcing.

Food insecurity—what has changed?

The Covid-19 crisis has defined the experience of communities since February 2020, and the effects linger in disrupted lives. The record levels of hardship and food-need that surged during the worst health crisis this nation has faced in a century necessitated crisis responses to stabilise communities and the welfare of the whole nation.

For much of the population, the impacts were relatively short-lived, but in a context where around a third of all households do not have enough or only just enough to meet their daily needs (see **Figure 3**, p13), for many the recovery out of hardship has been either short-lived or never really occurred.

For a period in late 2020 through to late 2022, increased financial assistance into households through welfare transfers and hardship support, combined with record low unemployment and rising real wages, helped lift tens of thousands of households out of income poverty and reduce material hardship. The past two years have seen these positive effects dissipate as unemployment has steadily increased and government welfare support has been cut back and access tightened.

Theological framing

In the Christian tradition, the story known as ‘the feeding of the five thousand’ is one of the few stories mentioned in all four Gospels of the New Testament. In the version from the book of Mark, likely the earliest account to be recorded in the biblical texts, the story of the miraculous feeding of five thousand people from a few loaves and fishes ends with the statement ‘all ate, and all were satisfied’ (Mark 6:30–46). This vision of all

people being able to eat and be satisfied inspires Te Kai Mākona, the food security framework being implemented by The Salvation Army Te Ope Whakaora.[1] This name speaks to food that satisfies and fills our needs as well as our equity and community aspirations. It also speaks to the holistic nature of satisfaction that goes beyond physical sustenance into emotional, cultural, spiritual and social sustenance.

A generation of foodbanks

Foodbanks began to appear in the late 1980s as an emergency response to food insecurity, arising from welfare reforms that increased poverty during that period. Since then, the number of foodbanks has continued to grow. Today, almost 40 years later, continuing high levels of poverty and inequality have seen the extent and level of food insecurity change for many people and whānau—from being a temporary experience to an enduring and complex challenge. Currently, The Salvation Army has 72 centres offering this kind of support, and many other organisations around the country also provide this support.

Our goal with Te Kai Mākona is that by 2030, people and whānau will no longer rely on our foodbanks; our vision is for a food-secure Aotearoa. Let's work together and make our nation into a place of food security where 'all are satisfied'.

Te Kai Mākona

The Salvation Army Te Kai Mākona food security framework has a vision of a country free of food insecurity and is transforming the way the network of 70 Community Ministries centres across the country work with people in need of food support.[2]

Te Kai Mākona draws from the evidence-based Food Ladders approach in the UK to build food security for whānau and communities.[3] It has three interconnected rungs:

1. catching and caring for people and whānau experiencing hardship;
2. capability building to strengthen food security for people and whānau; and
3. community building to strengthen our local food systems for everyone.

Te Kai Mākona operates through a set of values: **aroha** (acting with care and compassion); **choice** (offering choice to meet individual needs); **agency** (building on the strengths and skills of individuals); **whanaungatanga** (working relationally with those we serve); **manaakitanga** (recognising and upholding the mana of those we serve); **collaboration** (working proactively with others in the community); and **sustainability** (optimising our processes to operate sustainably).

This new strategic approach is creating a diverse range of community-based responses, including initiating an online food co-operative, increasing the number of local fruit and vegetables co-operatives, championing new community gardens and shared cooking groups, and developing 'choice model' social supermarkets like the Taranaki's Te Āhuru Mōwai social supermarket.[4]

1 'Our food response—Te Kai Mākona', accessed July 2025, https://www.salvationarmy.org.nz/get-help/welfare/te-kai-makona/building-food-secure-aotearoa/.

2 The Salvation Army New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa Territory. 'Exploring Te Kai Mākona', accessed August 2025. https://www.salvationarmy.org.nz/get-help/welfare/te-kai-makona/.

3 Megan Blake, 'Food Ladders Toolkit', GeoFoodie, accessed July 2025 https://geofoodie.org/food-ladders-toolkit-welcome/.

4 The Salvation Army New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa Territory. 'Salvation Army launches new Taranaki social supermarket.' October 4, 2024. Accessed December 2024. https://www.salvationarmy.org.nz/news/salvation-army-launches-new-taranaki-social-supermarket/.

SIX DIMENSIONS OF FOOD SECURITY

Food security is defined by the United Nations FAO as when 'all people at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life'.[5] The FAO has identified six dimensions of food security (**Figure 1**), and this paper focuses on each of these six dimensions in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. For each dimension, the vision, barriers and potential solutions are considered and recommendations for action are presented.

Figure 1: Six dimensions of food security

Agency	Individuals or groups having the capacity to act independently to make choices about what they eat, the foods they produce, how that food is produced, processed and distributed, and to engage in policy processes that shape food systems. The protection of agency requires socio-political systems that uphold governance structures that enable the achievement of FSN for all.
Stability	Having the ability to ensure food security in the event of sudden shocks (eg, and economic, health, conflict, or climatic crisis) or cyclical events (eg, seasonal food insecurity).
Sustainability	Food system practices that contribute to long-term regeneration of natural, social and economic systems, ensuring the food needs of the present generations are met without compromising the food needs of the future generations.
Access	Having personal or household financial means to acquire food for an adequate diet at a level to ensure that satisfaction of other basic needs are not threatened or compromised; and that adequate food is accessible to everyone, including vulnerable individuals and groups.
Availability	Having a quantity and quality of food sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances, and acceptable within a given culture, supplied through domestic production or imports.
Utilisation	Having an adequate diet, clean water, sanitation and health care to reach a state of nutritional wellbeing where all physiological needs are met.

5 Paola Termine, 'Ensuring food security: why agency and sustainability matter', Committee on World Food Security, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), accessed July 2025, https://www.fao.org/cfs/cfs-hlpe/insights/news-insights/news-detail/ensuring-food-security--why-agency-and-sustainability-matter/en.

AGENCY

Agency means individuals or groups having the capacity to act independently to make choices about what they eat, the foods they produce, how that food is produced, processed and distributed, and to engage in policy processes that shape food systems. The protection of agency requires socio-political systems to uphold governance structures that enable the achievement of food security and nutrition for all.

VISION

In 2023, a report by Kore Hiakai Zero Hunger Collective[6] highlighted the aspirations of communities to have control over their local food systems. This was evident in the many community-led plans and strategies summarised in the report. Food security for these communities was:

- **Local**—local communities controlling local food systems to benefit local communities and strengthen community resilience.
- **Affordable**—everyone has affordable access to good food.
- **Connected**—people are supporting, learning and sharing with each other, and are connected to their food, and the environment it comes from.
- **Healthy**—good food environments mean healthy food choices are easy.
- **Regenerative**—food systems that produce nutrient-dense food while protecting the environment and supporting flourishing ecosystems.
- **Resilient**—food systems that can withstand and recover from times of crisis.

Kore Hiakai identified that for local economies, this means having a diversity of local food businesses providing good, healthy and affordable food. Think of food co-ops, farmers markets, green grocers, butchers, international food stores and community grocer stores. They want local businesses to be able to make a fair profit, to pay fair wages to their employees and to care for the environment.

Imagine a future where every community has easy access to locally produced food through local food businesses that compete equally in the market alongside supermarkets. There is already evidence that food co-ops are emerging as an alternative to access more affordable, healthy foods, and to reduce food insecurity for low-income households.[7] There is also evidence that we can save up to 18 percent on our grocery bills by shopping at farmers markets.[8]

When the power of our food system sits with communities, solutions emerge, such as the new independent supermarket that opened in Flaxmere this year, following the departure of their New World store a year earlier. New owner Nirav Patel said: 'We are not only here to do business. We want to fit in and be part of the community … We saw that the community really needs a supermarket, and they deserve one that meets their needs.'[9] In the Kore Hiakai study, communities saw a revitalisation of Māori kai sovereignty as critical, including the different worldview it presented to the current food system. In te ao Māori, kai is central to the wellbeing of whānau, hapū and iwi, connecting people to their ancestors, descendants, whānau, the environment and each other. In 2023, Healthy Families New Zealand described this as follows: 'Kai is medicinal. When it is nutritionally dense and healthy, it feeds and heals our body and mind. When it is grown by our people, in our place, it feeds and heals our spirit. When it is prepared and eaten together, full of love, it feeds and heals our families and communities.'[10]

6 Sonya Cameron, *Realising Food Secure Communities in Aotearoa*, Kore Hiakai Zero Hunger Collective (May 2023), https://www.zerohunger.org.nz/realising-food-secure-communities-aotearoa.

7 K. Kent, C. Brooks, & F. MacMillan, 'Community-run food co-ops can reduce food insecurity and boost healthy diets, research shows', 13 May 2025, https://theconversation.com/community-run-food-co-ops-can-reduce-food-insecurity-and-boost-healthy-diets-research-shows-256100.

8 Emily Brookes, 'Cost of Living: Here's how much you could save by switching to the farmers' market', 24 March 2023, https://www.stuff.co.nz/lifestyle/food-drink/131593958/cost-of-living-heres-how-much-you-could-save-by-switching-to-the-farmers-market.

9 'Kiwi-Indians Bring Community-Centric Supermarket to Flaxmere' 23 January 2025, https://www.indianweekender.co.nz/features/kiwi-indian-entrepreneurs-to-launch-community-focused-supermarket accessed July 2025.

10 Healthy Families New Zealand. *National Kai Impact Report: Food Transformation in Aotearoa*, 2022, https://healthyfamilieswaitakere.org.nz/healthy-families-nz-kai-impact-report/.

Barriers

This is quite a different direction to where the Government is currently headed as it responds to issues with our food system. The Kore Hiakai report identified that communities are also worried that supermarkets and other large export-oriented businesses now dominate and have the most influence in the market, making it hard for local food businesses to compete and reducing options for local communities. This resulted in the food and income produced flowing out of regional economies—either for national supermarket supply chains or for export.

In March 2022, the Commerce Commission released a study on the grocery market. The study looked at how well the current market, dominated by two large supermarket chains, was serving consumers in terms of prices, quality and variety of groceries. Among its findings was that New Zealand was in the top five of 38 OECD countries for having the most expensive groceries.[11]

Since then, the government has taken several steps. The Grocery Industry Competition Act was passed in 2023, a Grocery Commissioner was appointed, and measures to make pricing and promotions more transparent were introduced. A new supply code of conduct has also been established together with a wholesale supply regime to boost competition.

So far, these measures have made no significant difference. In the second annual report released by the Grocery Commissioner in August 2025, it was noted that New Zealand consumers continue to spend more on groceries than their Australian and UK counterparts.[12]

In August 2025, the Government announced that it would remove regulatory and structural barriers preventing competitor supermarkets from launching or expanding in New Zealand.[13]

The Grocery Commissioner notes that even if a major player were to enter New Zealand tomorrow it would likely take at least a decade for them to gain around 10 percent of market share. In other words, new grocery retailers are unlikely to mean cheaper groceries anytime soon—and potentially never in communities such as Cannons Creek in Porirua or Rawene in Northland who would most benefit from it.[14] Additionally, by relying on an offshore grocery 'saviour', will likely drive an increase in imported (and often highly processed) food while sending profits back overseas.[15]

The Commerce Commission Market study revealed that Māori are not significantly represented in the retail grocery sector today. This is a shift from their historical involvement, where hapū and iwi played key roles throughout the entire food supply chain, including as traders.[16]

Solutions

Through the Grocery Commissioner, there is an opportunity to not only ensure that consumers have affordable groceries, but to help shape a food system that people actually want—one where local people and communities have greater control over what they eat, the food they produce, and how that food is processed and distributed, and are able to eat food that is good for their families, their local community and the environment.

The purpose of the Grocery Industry Competition Act is to promote competition and efficiency for the long-term benefit of consumers in New Zealand, and

11 Commerce Commission, *Market study into the grocery sector*, Mar 2022, https://comcom.govt.nz/about-us/our-role/competition-studies/market-study-into-retail-grocery-sector.

12 Commerce Commission. *2024 Pūrongo ā-Tau mō te Kai. 2024 Annual Grocery Report*. 6 August 2025. https://comcom.govt.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0028/368047/Annual-Grocery-Report-2024-6-August-2025-.pdf.

13 Nicola Willis, 'Express Lane for New Supermarkets' 27 August 2025. https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/express-lane-new-supermarkets.

14 Susan Edmonds, 'How far do you have to travel to a supermarket?', 21 March 2025, https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/business/545509/how-far-do-you-have-to-travel-to-a-supermarket.

15 Peter Bruce-Iri, "A Third Supermarket Chain? Yeah – Nah," 31 March 2025, Climate Action Tai Tokerau, https://northlandclimatechange.org/2025/03/31/a-third-supermarket-chain-yeah-nah/.

16 Public Health Advisory Committee, May 2024, *Rebalancing our food system*, Ministry of Health, https://www.health.govt.nz/publications/rebalancing-our-food-system, p.10

the Grocery Commissioner needs to have regard to the economic policies of the Government.

We believe that the Grocery Commissioner should become a Food Commissioner, with their purpose expanded to include local economic development, and a focus on small and medium food producers and enterprises rather than large corporate interests. This would support the competitiveness of these enterprises, encouraging growth in our regions and diversifying food supply and grocery provision. The Food Commissioner would focus on shortening supply chains, simplifying and reducing the cost of compliance, ensuring it is good business sense for the food we produce to remain in New Zealand, and supporting small businesses to create healthy food and local jobs. This would also strengthen environmental sustainability and resilience to food shocks, better supporting poorer and isolated communities with limited food access.

There is also an opportunity for the Government to continue to promote the establishment and growth of community-owned grocery stores, food co-ops, farmers markets and other initiatives aimed at the communities least able to afford food, such as through the Minister of Social Development (MSD) Food Secure Communities programme.

Continued funding is needed to scale up community initiatives, like the Community Food Security Initiatives Grants provided by MSD, which have funded projects aimed at increasing the amount of healthy, affordable food in low-income communities, such as the Community Grocer. Other initiatives include Wesley Community Action's Hauora Kai across the Wellington region, and Auckland City Mission's Mission Grocer. The money allocated in the Government's 2025 budget can allow the continuation of such funding for another year. It also gives time to further explore the social investment case for scaling programmes like these to increase access to healthy and affordable food in the communities that need it most.

Community Grocer

With the support of MSD's Food Secure Communities programme, The Salvation Army and Foodtogether have established the Community Grocer (https://communitygrocer.co.nz/). Our aim is that everyone in Aotearoa (especially low-income communities) has access to good, healthy, affordable food. Foodtogether runs the Community Grocer, with The Salvation Army as its inaugural partner, starting in Palmerston North, Hamilton and Manukau.

Through the Community Grocer initiative, anyone can shop online for groceries, which are then packed by the foodbank teams and delivered directly or picked up by customers at community locations. Surplus from the Community Grocer is used to fund Foodtogether partners such as The Salvation Army to continue our good work in the community.

At present, the Community Grocer is still small, but our dreams are big. We hope to expand our offering and reach over time, supporting local food enterprises and providing our communities with good, affordable food. **Please support us by shopping with us!**

STABILITY

Stability means having the ability to ensure food security in the event of sudden shocks (eg, an economic, health, conflict or climatic crisis) or cyclical events (eg, seasonal food insecurity).[17]

Vision

Consistent and stable food security requires that all people in every community experience stable food supply. There are many things that can impact the stability of supply, and our country has experienced these supply shocks in recent years. The Covid-19 pandemic and major weather disasters in food producing regions such as Tairāwhiti and Hawke's Bay are examples that have had both national and localised impacts on the stability of food. Food insecurity and instability can be temporary, such as through natural disasters, and thus requiring a temporary response. Or it can become chronic, caused by issues such as inadequate incomes and the high cost of food.[18]

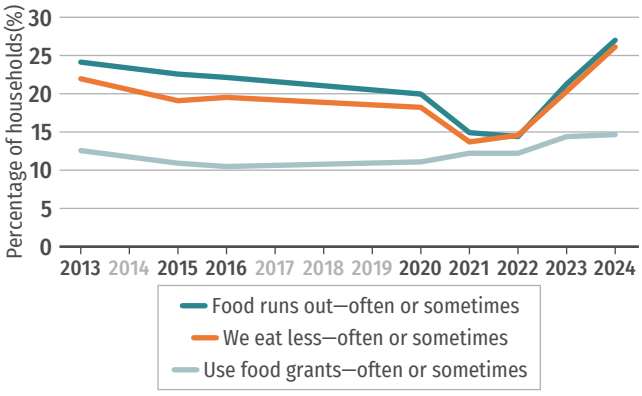
Above New Zealand Army supporting Hawke's Bay in Palmerston North after Cyclone Gabrielle.

Barriers

FOOD PRICE SHOCKS

'In a world worried about food security, we feed more than 40 million people with levels of efficiency and sustainability that are the envy of the world' says Nicola Willis, Minister of Finance.[19] Yet at the same time, food insecurity is at the highest level in more than a decade, with more than one in four (27%) New Zealand children living in households where food runs out sometimes or often (**Figure 2**). This means that food insecurity for children has almost doubled in the past two years.

Figure 2: Food security indicators, households with children under 15—2013–2024 (June years)[20]



17 Paola Termine, 'Ensuring food security: why agency and sustainability matter', Committee on World Food Security, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), accessed July 2025, https://www.fao.org/cfs/cfs-hlpe/insights/news-insights/news-detail/ensuring-food-security--why-agency-and-sustainability-matter/en.

18 Kore Hiakai Zero Hunger Collective, 'What is food security?' accessed July 2025, https://www.zerohunger.org.nz/food-security.

19 Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 'Going for Growth: Unlocking New Zealand's potential', February 2025 https://www.mbie.govt.nz/assets/going-for-growth.pdf.

20 P. Barber, A. Ika, *State of the Nation 2025—Kai, Kāinga, Whānau The Basics—Food, a Home, Family*, (February 2025), Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit, The Salvation Army Te Ope Whakaora, p.34 https://www.salvationarmy.org.nz/research-policy/social-policy-parliamentary-unit/state-nation-2025/.

Pacific children are suffering the largest impact, with more than one in two Pacific children in households experiencing food insecurity.[21] More than a third (35%) of tamariki Māori are affected, two to three times the rate experienced by children of European (18%) and Asian (12%) ethnicities.

FOOD INSECURITY FOR PACIFIC PEOPLES

Pacific communities experience the highest rates of food insecurity in Aotearoa. The amount of food support distributed by The Salvation Army to Pacific families was more than 50 percent higher in the year 2024 compared to 2019. Pacific households were most impacted by the economic challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and many have not been able to recover, compounded by the subsequent rises in living costs, housing costs and unemployment.

Five key underlining themes to food insecurity for Pacific families that seek assistance are identified in the 2024 *State of Pacific Peoples Report*:[22]

1. Financial hardship related to insufficient income, especially for single parents, part-time and seasonal workers, who find their income does not stretch to cover basic needs. This combined with unexpected expenses for power, emergency travel or car repairs can deplete limited resources.
2. Lack of access to support arises when people struggle to obtain government assistance due to declined applications, long wait times or confusion about their entitlements. Some who seek help have little or no income but are ineligible for government support due to age, employment or other factors.
3. Housing instability caused by high rent and utility costs, especially for those supporting extended family members.
4. Health and wellbeing issues, such as physical or mental illness, can complicate financial management and access to support. Similarly, caring responsibilities for children or older relatives can strain household resources.
5. Community and social support can contribute to strain on households where family cannot contribute to the costs. For others, it is the absence of such wider family and community support that leave people isolated and in need of food and other welfare support.

None of these issues are unique to Pacific households, but the magnitude of the inequity in food security experienced by Pacific people needs to be understood. It requires support and policy responses that draw on the strengths of the extended networks of Pacific communities and are designed in a way that reaches those who are currently missing out on support.

INADEQUATE INCOME

Food insecurity is more common among households on low incomes or receiving a welfare benefit, sole parent households or households with three or more children. People living in neighbourhoods with higher levels of deprivation and those who are renting are also more likely to experience food insecurity. Since 2017, the price of healthy food has risen dramatically compared with unhealthy food (see **Figure 6**, p24). MSD hardship assistance since 2019 shows that requests for food assistance have grown disproportionately to other forms of hardship assistance.[23]

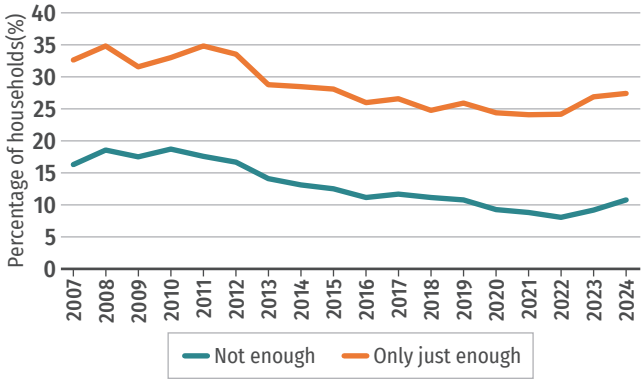
Income adequacy has been worsening over the past two years to June 2024 (most recent data) and is a key barrier to food security. There was an increase of nearly 50,000 in the number of households reporting inadequate income over the two years to June 2024. There were just under 214,000 households in June 2024 who said that they did not have enough income to meet their everyday needs, which is 10.8 percent of all the almost two million households compared to 8.1 percent in 2022 (**Figure 3**). Overall, almost four out of every ten households (38.2%) report they have 'not enough' or 'only just enough' income to meet their daily needs.

21 P. Barber, A. Ika, *State of the Nation* 2025, p.34

22 Ika, A., *State of Pacific Peoples*, (October 2024), Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit, The Salvation Army Te Ope Whakaora.

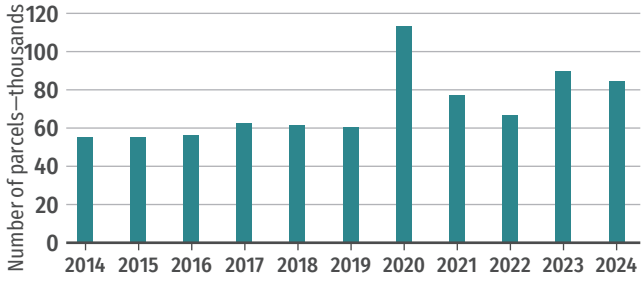
23 Public Health Advisory Committee, *Rebalancing our food system*, pp20–21.

Figure 3: Income adequacy to meet everyday needs, percentage of all households—2007–2024 (June years)[24]



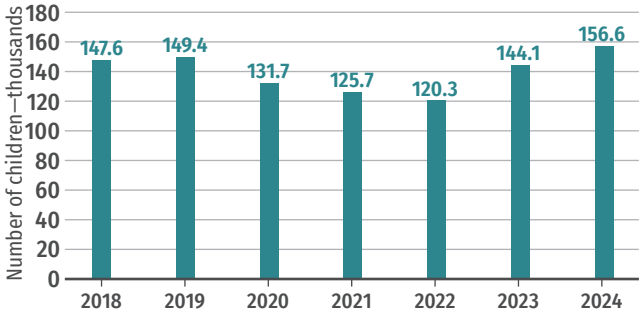
This income inadequacy has been reflected in those seeking assistance from The Salvation Army. In 2024, the amount of food assistance provided by The Salvation Army continued to be well above pre-Covid-19 levels, with the most common food requests being fruit, vegetables, meat and dairy. Around 84,500 food parcels were distributed, a six percent decrease compared with 2023, but 40 percent higher than in 2019 (**Figure 4**). While demand remains high, insufficient resources including reductions in government funding during 2024 meant that foodbanks have needed to implement appointment systems or reduce the amount of food assistance they provide.

Figure 4: Number of food parcels provided by The Salvation Army—2014–2024 (December years)[25]



The increasing food need reflects the reported levels of material hardship in households with children. In 2023 and 2024, material hardship began rising again, after several years of declining hardship. Since 2022, the number of children in material hardship increased by over 36,000 (**Figure 5**). The estimated number of children in material hardship was actually higher in 2024 than in 2018 when the baseline poverty measures began—156,600 in 2024 (13.4%) compared to 149,400 in 2018 (13.3%).

Figure 5: Number of children in material hardship—2018–2024 (June year, thousands)[26]



Solutions

Emergency food responses have proven their worth in different settings, whether it has been the Covid-19 pandemic, weather and climate emergencies such as Cyclone Gabrielle in February 2023 or simply household financial crises. Government and local authorities need to **ensure that disaster and emergency response systems are adequate and prepared**.

Communities who can produce, process and distribute food locally are also the communities that are most resilient in disasters. We describe in other parts of this report how we can strengthen our local food resilience. Disasters such as the Covid-19 pandemic and Cyclone Gabrielle have shown that there will always be a need for **national networks of food support and distribution**, such as the NZ Food Network[27] and food rescue organisations[28] that deliver ongoing and lasting social benefit across government budget cycles. Funding for this work

24 StatsNZ, 'Household income and housing-cost statistics: Year ended June 2024', accessed July 2025, https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/household-income-and-housing-cost-statistics-year-ended-june-2024/.

25 P. Barber, A. Ika, *State of the Nation* 2025, p.34.

26 StatsNZ, 'Child poverty statistics: Year ended June 2024,' accessed July 2025 https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/child-poverty-statistics-year-ended-june-2024/.

27 New Zealand Food Network, accessed July 2025, https://www.nzfoodnetwork.org.nz/.

28 Aotearoa Food Rescue Alliance, accessed July 2025, https://afra.org.nz/our-members/.

needs to move from being time-limited to being integrated into an ongoing and strategic approach to achieving food security for all.

Government hardship grants need to be better resourced to respond to short-term presenting need. Government needs to ensure that all have access to adequate income, whether they are in employment or not. Our foodbanks tell us that Work and Income is restricting access to support through unfair and often arbitrary decisions about declining or accepting applications for hardship support. Communication through the 0800 phone number and access to appointments for emergency situations, such as homelessness or lack of food, is difficult. The short-term 'benefit' to the government of reduced welfare spending through limiting access to hardship support needs to be understood in terms of the longer-term hardships and poorer health, economic and social outcomes for the people affected.

SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is defined as food system practices that contribute to long-term regeneration of natural, social and economic systems, ensuring the food needs of the present generations are met without compromising the food needs of future generations.

Vision

To create a food-secure Aotearoa, we need to rethink how we value food and people in Aotearoa—looking beyond our current paradigm of food as a commodity to be traded for maximum profit. It does not benefit New Zealanders if our economic growth is causing environmental harm such as damage to our waterways, social harm through loss of connection to our food environments, or physical harm through being unable to afford healthy food.[29] The long-term wellbeing of our people and environment also unlocks our economic potential.

A TE AO MĀORI VALUES-LED FOOD SYSTEM

We are fortunate that the blueprint for how we can do this is already here. By acknowledging and embracing te ao Māori understanding of kai, we can create a food system that rebuilds Māori kai sovereignty, while enabling everyone to be food secure—both now and in the future. The Māori worldview of kai provides a holistic approach to redefining our relationships with the planet and each other. This paper draws from *Kai Motuhake*, a 2024 report by Kore Hiakai Zero Hunger Collective,[30] and a 2024 exploration by Hana Burgess: *Intergenerational Intimacies: a whakapapa conceptualisation of kai*,[31] where these are described in more detail.

Central to addressing food insecurity is the recognition of rangatiratanga—the right of Māori to exercise authority and self-determination over their food systems. Tino rangatiratanga, as guaranteed in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, provides the foundation for Māori to reclaim and revitalise traditional food practices while innovating for contemporary contexts. This is not just about cultural recognition but about addressing structural inequities through restoring the sovereignty that was never ceded and decision-making power to those most affected by food insecurity.

In te ao Māori, kai is seen as a great connector, with whakapapa (genealogical connections) linking people with their ancestors (atua), the environment and each other. Food is not merely a commodity, but part of an interconnected web of relationships that link people to Papatūānuku (Earth Mother), Ranginui (Sky Father) and other atua. These whakapapa connections establish reciprocal responsibilities of care and respect. When gathering, preparing or eating kai, one is engaging with these ancestral relationships.

Māori are thus connected to the land as tangata whenua, or people of the land. Through this belonging also comes responsibility. One of the many roles of tangata whenua is to remain in good relation with the environment from which kai emerges, and to uphold its mana. When iwi, hapū or whānau are kaitiaki (guardians) for a region, they become mana whenua with the responsibility to manage and protect the area. Through deep knowledge of the place across its seasons, mana whenua know best how to uphold these good relations.

Mana whenua draw from tikanga or customary values to maintain relationships and guide behaviour, including with kai. They are knowledge-holders and experts of kai, often specific to their geography. Tikanga helps to regulate food practices, in particular the concepts of tapu (sacred or restricted) and noa (ordinary or unrestricted), thus ensuring safety, cultural harmony and the regeneration of resources.

29 Public Health Advisory Committee, *Rebalancing our food system* pp.6–7.

30 Morris M, Tibble K & Malcolm T (2024) *Kai Motuhake: Re-indigenising and re-localising food systems—a starting place to tackle the legacy of colonisation in Aotearoa*. Kore Hiakai Zero Hunger Collective.

31 Hana Burgess and Haylee Koroi, (2024) Intergenerational Intimacies: a whakapapa conceptualisation of kai, Toi Tangata, Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland.

Mana whenua have the authority to make use of its resources, including kai, and to provide hospitality to others, thus uplifting both the mana of the visitors and of their own people through sharing abundance. This includes the planting, harvesting, preparation and eating of kai, as well as trading and celebrating with others. This connection through kai to the environment and each other creates both belonging and gratitude.

Barriers

SETTLER COLONISATION

Through the process of settler colonisation, however, colonial policies and land confiscation deliberately undermined Māori authority to determine how kai was produced (in other words, Māori kai sovereignty), and then Māori food security—to always be able to access enough food to meet dietary needs to thrive.[32] In 2024, Māori were the recipients of 45 percent of all food support distributed by the Salvation Army, while 34 percent of Māori children lived in households that ran out of food sometimes or often.[33]

Prior to 1860, Māori had sophisticated and adaptive food economies. Archaeological evidence shows extensive cultivation areas with complex irrigation systems, terraced gardens and storage facilities. Māori grew a variety of crops through extensive maara kai (food gardens)—some 8000 hectares in Auckland alone—and operated more than 50 flour mills around the country. Māori traded with each other, exported to Australia and supplied settlers with essential food.[34]

Colonisation significantly disrupted these systems. British settlement and the New Zealand land wars led to the dispossession and confiscation of large areas of Māori land, particularly arable land, the burning of villages and destroying gardens. The New Zealand land wars further destroyed resources like flour mills, crops and transport lines, undermining economic stability. After the land wars, large scale food production by Māori was severely disrupted, while British settlers started their own large farms, producing food and profits for themselves. Discriminatory government policies continued, for example the Native Land Court system fragmenting collective ownership, making sustainable Māori food production increasingly difficult, while environmental legislation damaged traditional food sources. Today only around five percent of land remains in Māori hands.[35]

Colonisation replaced Māori food sources with grazing land and foreign plants, imposing settlers' food choices over Māori food systems. Wetlands were drained, forests cleared and oceans trawled.[36] Economic migration of Māori to urban areas in the 20th century further reduced access to traditional food gathering places and knowledge, impacting spiritual and cultural practices. These losses disrupted the passing of knowledge and relationships between people and the environment.

A GLOBALISED FOOD SYSTEM

Today, our colonial legacy continues where we produce food and send it overseas for others who can afford to pay more than we can in a globalised world ruled by our free trade agreements. Ironically, these are often at lower prices than the goods are sold for in New Zealand—such as recent examples of our butter being cheaper in Australia than New Zealand.[37]

32 Morris M, Tibble K & Malcolm T, *Kai Motuhake*, p.15.

33 Ministry of Health. 2024. *Annual Data Explorer 2023/24: New Zealand Health Survey* [Data File]. https://minhealthnz.shinyapps.io/nz-health-survey-2023-24-annual-data-explorer/ Accessed July 2025.

34 Bhaveeka Madagammana, 'Auckland was once a food garden managed by Māori. That knowledge could shape the future.' 23 May 2025, Newsroom https://newsroom.co.nz/2025/03/24/auckland-was-once-a-food-garden-managed-by-maori-that-knowledge-could-shape-the-future/.

35 Ibid.

36 Burgess and Koroi, *Intergenerational Intimacies*, p40.

37 Caren Copek, 'It's cheaper to buy this NZ-made butter in Australia than it is here', 7 June 2025, https://www.stuff.co.nz/nz-news/360714527/its-cheaper-buy-nz-made-butter-australia-it-here.

Solutions

REVITALISING MĀORI KAI SOVEREIGNTY

Ending food insecurity for Māori needs to begin with revitalising Māori kai sovereignty. Hutchings describes this as 'prioritising local markets and living economies, it empowers whānau and hapū driven food production, distribution and consumption, based on environmental, social, cultural and economic sustainability … it promotes ancestral foodways and revitalises indigenous food knowledges'.[38]

Māori are leading the way in revitalising kai sovereignty and strengthening food security, with more to be done. Kore Hiakai in 2023 outlined how communities are **embracing te ao Māori for values-led local food systems**.[39] These are values that we could embrace as a nation:

Rangatiratanga—leadership and authority over local food systems sits with mana whenua and other local people in te Tiriti partnership.

Manaakitanga—through sharing, hospitality and support, everyone is valued and food-secure.

Whanaungatanga—genuine connections through strong, inclusive relationships.

Kaitiakitanga—uplifting and protecting the mana and vitality of the source of food, and the wider environment.

Kotahitanga—working collectively for common outcomes.

There are urgent opportunities to **strengthen Māori leadership across our food system** at multiple levels. The Public Health Advisory Committee in 2024 has called for **a national food strategy that upholds Te Tiriti and prioritise the health and wellbeing of people** and the environment, ahead of economic growth.[40] Such a strategy should have Māori representation at all levels of governance and decision-making. The Matike Mai Aotearoa model of shared constitutional governance based on Te Tiriti o Waitangi is one example of how this might be done.[41] In the primary industries, Māori already contribute significantly, including 30 percent of the beef and lamb industry and a 300 percent growth in horticulture in 12 years.[42] Successful examples include Miraka dairy company which incorporates tikanga Māori into its business practices while achieving international success.[43] Mana whenua are partnering with communities and councils to develop local food strategies, ensuring local food systems are reactivated by those with deep ties to the land, embracing local knowledge and practices about kai, and protecting the environment.

Effective food security solutions must actively **recognise and restore the relationships between mana whenua and their traditional food landscapes**. This requires more than consultation; it demands genuine partnerships based on Te Tiriti, such as that of the Wellington Regional Kai Network,[44] or through the guidance provided in the Ministry for the Environment's mahinga kai kete.[45] This includes recognition of hapū and iwi boundaries, cultural needs and practices, restoring and protecting the environment within those boundaries and putting policies in place to ensure that the practices of others are sustainable.[46]

Across Aotearoa, Māori communities are actively **reclaiming food sovereignty through flaxroots initiatives** that combine traditional knowledge with contemporary approaches. Communities are nourishing whānau with healthy, homegrown kai, while strengthening cultural identity and growing connectedness to the environment. For example, Papatūānuku Kōkiri Marae in Mangere teaches

38 Morris M, Tibble K & Malcolm T , *Kai Motuhake*, p.20.

39 Cameron, *Realising Food Secure Communities in Aotearoa*, Kore Hiakai Zero Hunger Collective, p.8.

40 Public Health Advisory Committee, *Rebalancing our food system.*

41 Claire Charters, 'The myth of sovereignty', 30 October 2022, E-Tangata https://e-tangata.co.nz/comment-and-analysis/claire-charters-the-myth-of-sovereignty/.

42 Ministry of Primary Industries, *Fit for a better world Aotearoa New Zealand. Progress Update 2023*, (June 2023) p.26. https://www.mpi.govt.nz/dmsdocument/57295-Fit-for-a-Better-World-2023-progress-update/.

43 Miraka https://www.miraka.co.nz/ accessed July 2025.

44 Regional Kai Network, Wellington https://www.regionalkainetwork.org.nz/ accessed July 2025.

45 Ministry for the Environment, 'Mahinga kai kete' https://environment.govt.nz/publications/mahinga-kai-kete/ accessed July 2025.

46 Public Health Advisory Committee, *Rebalancing our food system*, p40.

traditional gardening methods along with te reo Māori and tikanga that build cultural capability while improving the health of whānau.[47] Many of these initiatives have achieved remarkable results on a shoestring, with land access and funding constraints limiting further development. Supporting these Māori-led community initiatives can address immediate food insecurity while building long-term social, cultural and environmental resilience.

For Tangata Tiriti, which is defined as all non-Māori New Zealanders, supporting Māori kai sovereignty requires recognising the ongoing impacts of colonisation on our food systems; supporting Māori-led initiatives through ethical partnerships; advocating for policy changes that restore land access and resource rights; and challenging food-system inequities in our own communities. True partnership means **acknowledging that Māori solutions to food insecurity benefit all New Zealanders** through creating environmentally sustainable, culturally rich and socially just food systems.

47 Papatūānuku Kōkiri Marae, Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi https://www.wananga.ac.nz/experience/our-students/papatuanuku-kokiri-marae/ accessed July 2025.

ACCESS

Access means having personal or household financial means to acquire food for an adequate diet at a level to ensure that satisfaction of other basic needs is not threatened or compromised; and that adequate food is accessible to everyone, including vulnerable individuals and groups.[48]

Vision

This dimension of food security carries the vision that people feel a sense of security that they have both economic and physical geographical access to food. People with adequate incomes can afford the good, nutritious food they need. Alongside sufficient income, people also need to be able to find that food in those communities, within reasonable distance and from a variety of sources.

Barriers

ECONOMIC ACCESS TO FOOD

Economic access is all about the affordability of food relative to incomes. The major change since pre-Covid-19 has been the significant impact of rising inflation, which has affected lower-income earners disproportionately more.

Food insecurity reduced in the period where unemployment reduced, and real wages kept ahead of inflation (late 2020–mid 2022), but the recession of the past two years is a second social and economic shock in a short period after the Covid-19 pandemic. Lower-income households do not have sufficient buffers of savings or other financial capital to draw on.

As is often pointed out, food is one of the few discretionary items for households struggling with living costs and constrained incomes. There was a 54 percent increase in the cost of a low-cost healthy food basket between 2018 and 2023 from $10,420 ($200 per week) to $16,083 ($309 per week),[49] compared to the increase in the household living-cost price index (HLPI) of 27 percent in the same period. Over the same period, the median hourly earnings rose by 27 percent ($31.21 to $39.53), or weekly earnings increased from $997 to $1273 (28%).

Since 2019, a significant shift in food prices has had a major impact on food security for those on lower incomes. In the years up to 2019, food prices in a selection of 85 food staples had remained relatively stable (apart from dairy products) when smoothed for seasonal variations using a rolling 12-month average. Around the time of the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, these dynamics began to change. All prices began to increase, with fruit and vegetable prices showing the steepest increases during 2012 and 2022 with the impact of the war in Ukraine dramatically increasing fertiliser costs. While all food prices increased in this time, the sweetened foods increased by much less and their prices relative to healthier fruit and vegetables decreased. It is becoming increasingly expensive to maintain healthy diets in New Zealand.[50]

The Covid-19 pandemic, climate and international events since then have brought sustained disruption to food prices, the impacts of which are still affecting people. Food prices on average over the year are all significantly higher than pre-Covid-19 and in real terms after adjusting for inflation, the largest decreases in prices are to be found amongst the unhealthier sweetened foods.

Solutions

ECONOMIC SOLUTIONS

Food security is inextricably linked to economic conditions, which is very clear in the context of the current sustained recession in this country. Economic solutions to food insecurity therefore must address some of those fundamentals of basic

48 Termine, 'Ensuring food security: why agency and sustainability matter' (FAO)

49 Strom, J., Te Ao, B., Rush, E., & Mackay, S. (2024). How has the cost of feeding New Zealand children well changed from 2018 to 2023? Monthly price changes of a modelled lower-cost healthy diet. *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/03036758.2024.2370882

50 Vatsa, P., & Renwick, A. (2024). Food prices in New Zealand: implications for feeding people better. *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/03036758.2024.2368788

social and economic rights. It should be an accepted political consensus that regardless of the economic cycle, no household in this land needs to be without food. Regardless of the international commodity prices for butter, cheese, meat and kiwifruit—households in this country should be able to pay affordable prices for the basics of healthy living.

Ensuring every household has access to a liveable income whether from paid work or income support should not be seen as an expensive social policy 'nice-to-have', but rather as the cornerstone of a thriving domestic food sector and the base for a robust international food export sector. Local food demand that is met in an affordable way by locally based production will contribute to people living and working in communities that are more likely to be healthy, and in turn be productive and motivated employees.

The evidence about the level of income needed is readily available and clearly identifies that wage rates below the Living Wage are not sufficient to ensure that a typical working household can meet the essentials of daily life to participate in society.[51] The Living Wage has the advantage that it does not rely on government policy or legislation but is an independent movement that employers can join and seek certification as accredited Living Wage employers. Successful businesses founded on ensuring all workers earn enough to live with dignity are surely what we would hope for all enterprises in this land. The dignity of having enough income to feed your family is something that workers moving to the Living Wage have repeatedly talked about.

At a broader structural level, the 50-year battle to achieve **pay equity for women** has suffered an enormous setback in the recent cancellation of pay equity processes that were forecast to bring more than $12 billion in pay settlements benefiting women working in sectors as such as health and disability services, schools and ECE.[52]

Industry-level bargaining and agreements are a basic part of the employment landscape for many similar wealthy countries and contribute to those countries having much lower rates of food insecurity and material hardship. The idea that people who are working in a sector should receive a fairer share of the return from their labour is a foundational concept of labour relations in this country and internationally. Unfortunately, the current government has made it a clear goal to dampen real wage increases and has already taken the Fair Pay Agreements legislation away that sought to make sector-based pay agreements providing wide protecting for basic pay and conditions for workers. This will add to the income pressure of workers, including food insecurity.

Food security should not be conditional on employment status, and **a liveable income for those not in paid employment is equally crucial**. There is now a solid base of data and research that shows how the welfare system contributes to income adequacy, and recent years have seen significant changes to welfare support that lifted incomes closer to levels that would allow all households to afford basic food and other living costs.

We believe it is crucial that all welfare assistance needs to be regularly updated to ensure that they keep up with rising living costs and wage growth through formal indexing to household living-cost price indexes and wage indexes. The evidence from the annual MSD *Total Incomes Report*[53] shows how real incomes for those receiving income support had been increasing much closer to accepted poverty lines up until 2022, but since then have barely kept pace with rising living costs. In April 2024, it was still the case that, after taking into account all the different sources of income received by those on welfare benefits, around 80 percent were still receiving weekly incomes below current poverty measures. Material hardship and poverty

51 Charles Waldegrave, Erin Rogers, and Giang Nguyen, *Report of the Measurement Review for a new Zealand Living Wage*, (April 2023) Family Centre Social Policy Research Centre https://www.livingwage.org.nz/reports_and_research

52 Craig McCulloch, 'Budget 2025: Coalition claws back savings from pay equity, Kiwisaver, Best Start', 22 May 2025, RNZ https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/561806/budget-2025-coalition-claws-back-savings-from-pay-equity-kiwisaver-best-start

53 Ministry of Social Development, (2024), *Total Incomes Annual Report—2024*, https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/research/benefit-system/total-incomes-annual-report-2024.html

will increase further if there is not a clear legislative and policy requirement to ensure that welfare payments are sufficient to keep people out of material hardship and poverty.

Barriers

PHYSICAL ACCESS TO FOOD— FOOD DESERTS AND FOOD SWAMPS

It seems extraordinary that in our wealthy country people struggle to physically access adequate and healthy food. But the geographic reality of 'food deserts' or 'food swamps' characterises some urban areas and rural communities. Lack of access to supermarkets or other affordable food outlets for groceries and other basics in localities (food deserts) and concentration of fast-food outlets in lower income communities (food swamps) is well-documented in this country. Food deserts are generally considered areas that have limited access to affordable and healthy food. Food swamps are commonly defined as communities with a high density of outlets selling high-calorie, unhealthy junk food.[54]

When the power of our food system sits with large, profit driven businesses, lower income communities like Cannons Creek in Porirua end up without supermarkets. That means people in the area need to travel some distance to shop more affordably. For many poorer households, that is not practical when access to vehicles or public transport suitable for grocery shopping is insufficient. Similarly, smaller semi-rural communities may not have any grocery outlet at all and face driving some distance to shop for food.

In the same communities where there is poor access to good food, there is paradoxically frequently a concentration of fast-food outlets selling nutritionally poor food that is also relatively expensive. Addressing this issue means delving into the arcane world of local government regulation and zoning rules, as well addressing the 'social license' of the current large players in food retail. The closure of supermarkets and the concentration of outlets into larger stores that can operate in an economy of scale model may deliver higher profits to the business owners, but does not deliver the same social return in the form of thriving local communities nourished by quality and affordable food outlets.

Solutions

PHYSICAL ACCESS TO GOOD FOOD

Local Government Policy needs to explore the tools available to local councils to plan and regulate for access to healthy and affordable food.

Setting limits on the kinds of food outlets in communities and requiring the grocery retailers to commit to providing grocery services in communities runs up against prevailing assumptions of market choice. But as the Commerce Commission report on the grocery sector highlights, the current reality is a lack of competition.[55] Using local authority rules and regulations to require developers and food companies to offer affordable food in all communities, within reasonable access, should be seen as the 'price' of social license to operate.

Healthy food environment by-laws at local government level should be explored as part of the toolkit for communities, to ensure that everyone can access healthy, affordable food wherever they live. Local government has a considerable role to play by making food security an integral part of the local planning process. Potential regulatory and legislative changes arising from the investigations into the grocery retail sector need to be prioritised, which could support greater diversity in local food supply and retailing.

Local communities are best placed to shape what works for them and need national level government to enable them, both with law changes giving appropriate powers to communities as well as ways of resourcing this work. At present,

54 Ronji Tanielu, *Food For Thought: Disrupting Food Insecurity in Aotearoa*, (2021), Social Policy andParliamentary Unit, The Salvation Army Te Ope Whakaora https://www.salvationarmy.org.nz/food-thought-disrupting-food-insecurity-aotearoa/.

55 Commerce Commission. *2024 Pūrongo ā-Tau mō te Kai. 2024 Annual Grocery Report*. 6 August 2025. https://comcom.govt.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0028/368047/Annual-Grocery-Report-2024-6-August-2025-.pdf.

the Food Act prevents local councils from taking action to advance public health, so it makes sense to amend the Local Government Act to **enable local government to take action to improve food environments**, such as local healthy food policies or limiting fast food density. Evidence from a study of local authorities in England that have banned takeaways near schools has shown to have reduced access to unhealthy food.[56]

Social access to food is just as critical as the commercial and retail aspect. It is the missing piece in many communities, but there are also multiple examples of work to promote food security in social initiatives that bring people together to improve the food-scape in their area.

There does also need to be recognition that **ongoing resourcing of food security-related work** should be a baseline commitment in local government and central government. The MSD Community Food Security Initiative Fund (see p7) is an example of how to put this into practice. The commitment to this would be greatly strengthened by evaluation and analysis through a social investment and community wellbeing lens.

Case study: The Salvation Army in Whangārei

Te Kai Mākona food security framework, which drives the work of The Salvation Army, is one of multiple examples of community-level efforts to 'break the circuit' of food insecurity and promote good food solutions.

An evaluation of the Whangārei Te Kai Mākona work of The Salvation Army shows the value of integrating food support into a strengths-based approach to transformation. The model operating in Whangārei has woven a kete of kai-based support: choosing kai through a social supermarket approach where whānau choose what they need from the available goods; cooking together in a six-week course aimed at building skill to cook well on a tight budget; growing kai through a community garden; a pātaka kai shared pantry at the Whangārei centre; weekly community meals to bring people together in a welcoming, non-judgemental space; and partnering with Food Rescue to collect surplus food from local businesses to share.

Learnings from whānau interviewed for the evaluation include the fact that people value support that is flexible, non-judgemental, relational and consistent. Support from people who share cultural backgrounds or lived experience helps break down barriers and create opportunities for change.

'It's hard asking for food. You don't do it because you want to, you do it because you have to,'—Survey participant.

What this work has shown is that people enjoy the benefit of working together towards a shared goal, the relationships created by this work and a strengthened connection to their land/whenua and environment. Such work still needs to be resourced, but it brings together 'in-kind' resources of volunteers, land or facilities made available at below-market rates or no costs, that have a multiplier effect to actual financial resources applied. A seeding financial grant can make the difference between an initiative becoming a reality and reaching a scale that can offer sustainability.

56 Nesta UK, *Blueprint for halving obesity: rapid review. The effect of restricting access to fast food outlets on obesity-related outcomes*, (2024), https://blueprint.nesta.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Reduce-number-of-takeaways-in-proximity-to-schools.pdf accessed July 2025.

AVAILABILITY

Availability is defined as having a quantity and quality of food sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances and acceptable within a given culture, supplied through domestic production or imports.[57]

Vision

LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION

The key to unlocking communities that are abundant in good, healthy, affordable food may just require the Government to reorient some of its focus to support domestic food producers and food businesses that are feeding New Zealanders, rather than focusing almost exclusively on food for export. With our vast amount of productive land, we can strengthen food security by producing healthy, affordable food locally and reducing our reliance on imported, often less healthy, processed food.

Imagine every community having easy access to locally produced food from farmers, fishers, and others, through direct sales, farmers markets and food co-ops. Dave Kennedy of Farmers Market NZ says 'It would be great if we could return to the local food security we once had in Southland. We had flour mills, we grew most of our own grain. We had multiple dairy factories, and most food created in Southland was consumed locally. It's down from 80 percent a few years ago to 10 percent now.'[58]

This future would mean a different kind of agriculture, based on smaller, more affordable, more sustainable and more diversified farms which data shows are competitive with industrial agriculture in total output, and well-placed to increase food production where it is most needed.[59] This would also boost local resilience against natural disasters and supply chain disruptions.

Our diverse communities have unique food needs best met by local producers. By shortening supply chains and strengthening connections between growers, producers and consumers, we can ensure everyone has access to nutritious, affordable food. Investing in local food economies ensures profits stay within communities, fostering jobs, growth, innovation and resilience. This shift would both make food more affordable and support local farmers and retailers.

A strong local food system means more than food security. Supporting our local food economy invests in the wellbeing and prosperity of our communities, ensuring a thriving future for all.

Barriers

Since April 2024, the average price of 500 grams of butter nearly doubled reaching $8.80 by June 2025.[60] The high prices for butter on international markets is great news for our farmers, but not so great for other New Zealanders' wallets or their health. Before 2017, the cost of healthy foods (fruit and vegetables, grains, dairy, meat and alternatives, fats and oils) was comparable in price to unhealthy foods (energy-dense, nutrient-poor or high in saturated fat, sodium or added sugar). However, since 2017, there has been a significant rise in the price of healthy food compared with unhealthy food (**Figure 6**, see also p19).[61]

57 Termine, 'Ensuring food security: why agency and sustainability matter' (FAO).

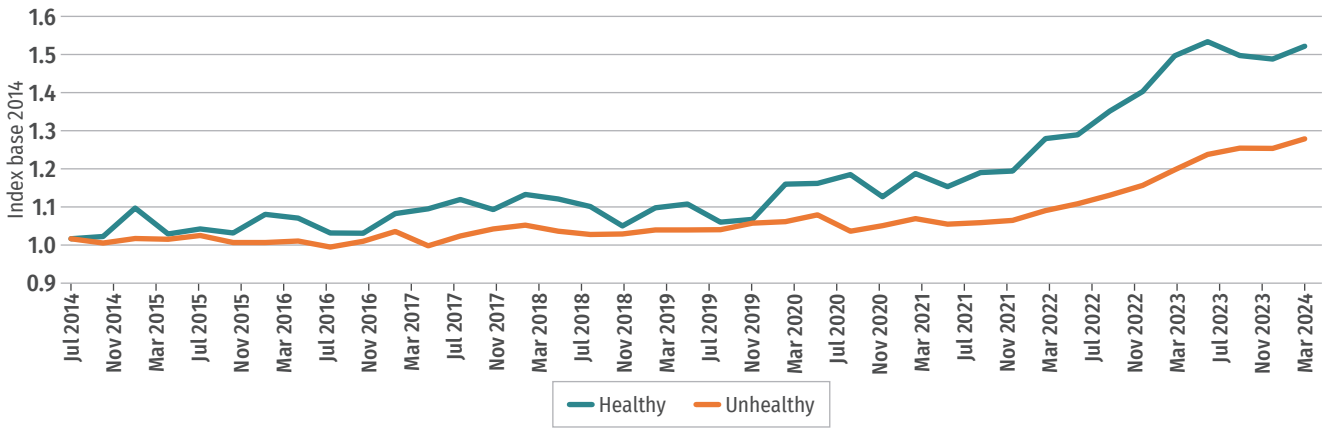
58 Emily Brookes, Interview with Dave Kennedy, 'Cost of living: here's how much you could save by switching to the farmers' market' accessed July 2025 https://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/food-drink/131593958/cost-of-living-heres-how-much-you-could-save-by-switching-to-the-farmers-market.

59 IPES Food, 'From Uniformity to Diversity', June 2016, International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, https://ipes-food.org/report-summary/from-uniformity-to-diversity/ accessed July 2025.

60 StatsNZ, 'Food prices increase 4.6 percent annually', 21 July 2025, https://www.stats.govt.nz/news/food-prices-increase-4-6-percent-annually/ accessed July 2025.

61 Public Health Advisory Committee, *Rebalancing our food system*, p.20.

Figure 6: Food Price Index, monthly weighted average prices by healthy and unhealthy foods—2014–2024 (base July 2014)[62]



The changes in prices are having major impacts on the quality of the food we buy. Economist Shamabeel Eaqub noted that only about two thirds of New Zealand households are now regularly purchasing vegetables, fruit and meat, about a 20 percent drop since 2016.[63] A recent Consumer survey had similar findings, with 29 percent of survey respondents saying they have changed their shopping habits in the past year, buying less fresh and whole foods like fruit, vegetables and meat.[64]

This has significant impacts on our health and wellbeing. But it also raises the question of why fruit, veges, meat and dairy are so expensive in New Zealand, when they are also the foods we produce in abundance in this country.

PRIORITISING FOOD EXPORTS

A large part of the answer is that we export around most of our food production (including 95% of dairy)[65] and successive New Zealand governments have prioritised the interests of large food exporters over those of local food growers, producers and retailers. In 2022, Ian Proudfoot in the KPMG Agribusiness Agenda explained the issue as follows:

> 'We have two food systems in New Zealand; a world class export system and a domestic system that has demonstrated its frailties over the last two years. We need different business models to lift the resilience of domestic food producers. A failure to provide accessible, quality, nutritious food to all New Zealanders will ultimately impact our ability to continue to generate the export returns we enjoy today.'[66]

There are a vast number of government agencies involved with the issue of food, but no central agency and no coordinated focus on ensuring we have enough good food to feed New Zealanders. The most obvious agency is the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) who are 'New Zealand's lead agency for the food and fibre sector'. MPI outlined its strategic intentions for 2024–2028 with a focus on doubling export value by 2034, aiming to make New Zealand the world's most trusted provider of high-value food and fibre products. While prosperity is a goal, defined as generating a thriving economy through higher value goods in demand worldwide, there is no mention of feeding New Zealanders or supporting domestic food production.[67]

62 Public Health Advisory Committee, *Rebalancing our food system*, p.22.

63 Wei Shao, 'A third of households cut spending on fresh food', The Press 31 July 2024, https://www.thepress.co.nz/nz-news/350360383/third-households-cut-spending-fresh-food.

64 Belinda Castles, 'Supermarket prices: shoppers are trading health for cheaper food', 22 May 2025, Consumer NZ https://www.consumer.org.nz/articles/supermarket-prices-shoppers-are-trading-health-for-cheaper-food.

65 Farah Hancock, 'Who's eating New Zealand?', RNZ 7 July 2025, https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/whoseatingnewzealand/446357/who-s-eating-new-zealand.

66 KPMG, Agribusiness Agenda 2022. Chapter 2 Growth from resolve and resilience—insights into action, (November 2022) https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/nz/pdf/2022/11/agri-agenda-2022-chapter-2-v2.pdf accessed July 2025.

67 Ministry for Primary Industries, Strategic Intentions Kawatau Ā Rautaki 2024–2028, (October 2024) https://www.mpi.govt.nz/dmsdocument/65928-Strategic-Intentions-2024-2028/.

Angela Clifford from food advocacy organisation Eat New Zealand says, 'The presumption is that prioritising domestic food supply might affect free trade agreements although I've never seen any evidence of this. Given a rapidly changing global trade environment, we clearly have to reassess our position here, especially given almost all our trade partners have ways of supporting domestic supply.'[68]

Clifford points out that many businesses want to produce food for New Zealand, but they lack adequate support. When butter prices are high, where are the small butter producers? She explains that they largely don't exist because of the high cost of compliance and the absence of domestic food policies and regulations to support small producers and businesses. 'A small butter producer should expect right-sized costs, rules and regulations.'

The Government is quite capable of taking action on this issue. It has 'moved swiftly' to remove regulations hampering the success of food exporters, including reducing costs, slashing red tape and streamlining approvals with a view to increase export profits.[69] Meanwhile, small domestic food producers and businesses are petitioning to end indiscriminate food charges and regulatory requirements they describe as unrealistic and unfair:

> 'The current food safety system favours large businesses and promotes an industry where small, unique and community-oriented businesses struggle to survive and will gradually disappear resulting in a monopoly of large, homogenous food businesses. The change will not be immediate and obvious, but it will be very significant and detrimental to our wellbeing and quality of life. We already have plenty of examples where large, multinational businesses have dominated over and replaced small, local businesses.'[70]

Solutions

While the Government in New Zealand continues to prioritise the interests of exporters and large businesses, the international evidence is vast and clear:

> 'We must transition to a new paradigm of agricultural production based on diversified, resilient and sustainable agroecological systems which work simultaneously to achieve economic, environmental, social and health outcomes. Smallholders, small-scale fisheries and indigenous communities are central to the transformation as the engine of economic development'.[71]

Eat New Zealand have developed a model that shows how we can do this, for 'mana-centred local food systems that acknowledge the wellbeing of people, livelihoods and communities in relationship with Papatūānuku, the planet' (**Figure 7**).

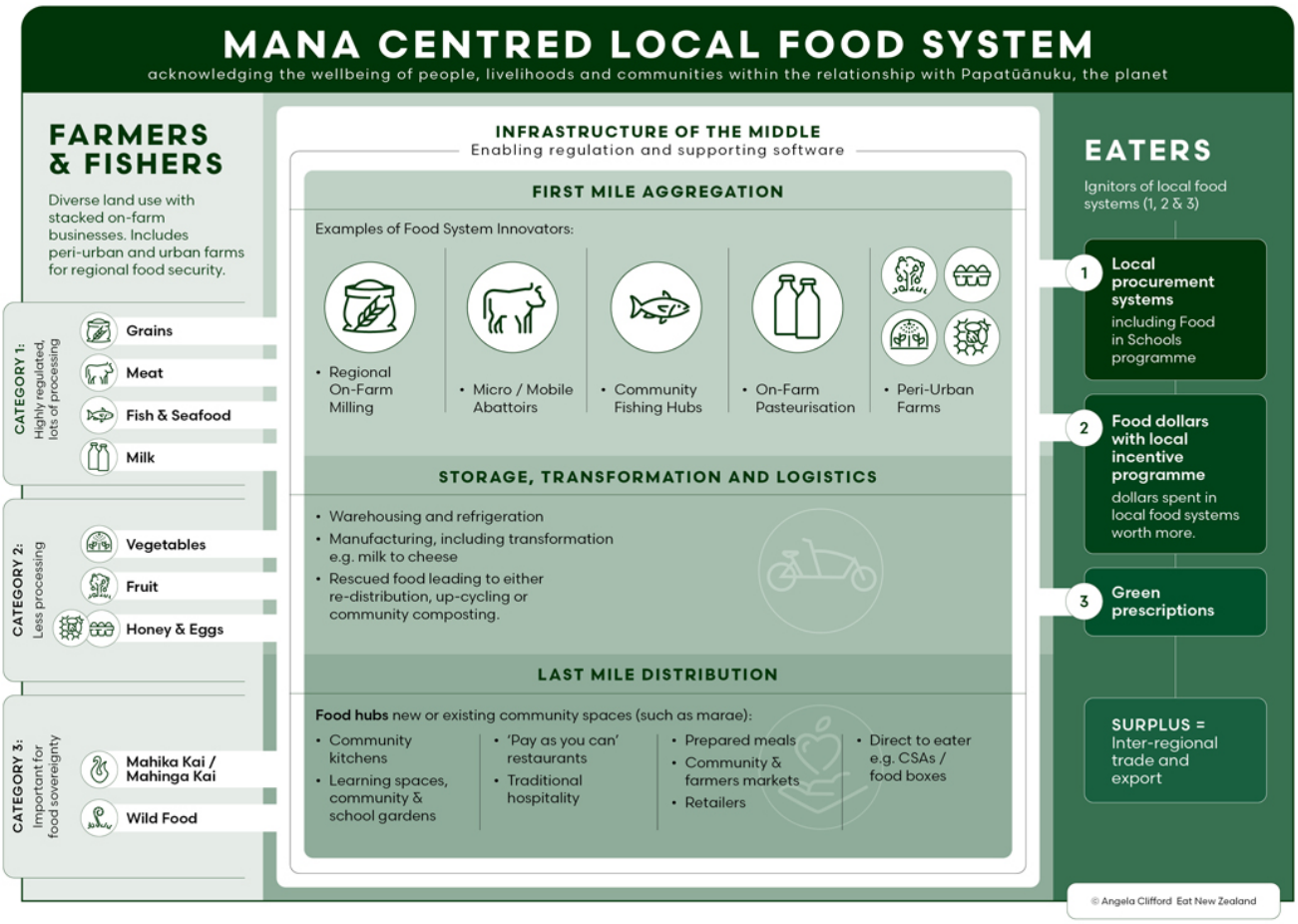
68 Eat New Zealand https://eatnewzealand.nz/—personal communication with author.

69 RNZ, 'Food and fibre exports set to top $57bn', 12 December 2024, https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/country/536410/food-and-fibre-exports-set-to-top-57bn.

70 Ben Plows-Kolff, 'Make food regulations fair and affordable for small businesses', Our Action Station petition, accessed July 2025, https://our.actionstation.org.nz/petitions/support-fairer-food-safety-regulations-and-costs-for-small-food-businesses.

71 United Nations Development Programme, 'Food Systems Transformation' https://www.undp.org/facs/food-systems-transformation accessed July 2025.

Figure 7: National Food System[72]



The Mana Centred Local Food System offers a powerful blueprint for the Government to better nurture local food producers and bolster the food security of our communities. By tailoring regulations and compliance to suit small-scale producers, and providing essential infrastructure for processing, storing and transporting their products, we can create a thriving, resilient food system that benefits everyone.

While the New Zealand Government drags its feet, other governments around the world such as the United Kingdom,[73] Scotland[74] and Canada[75] are taking the issue of ensuring their people have access to good healthy food more seriously.

Now the new Australian Government is looking to do the same, with its Feeding Australia strategy that aims to boost the security and supply chain resilience of food production systems in Australia, and to identify opportunities to minimise price volatility and costs at the checkout.[76] New Zealand and Australia already work jointly on food standards, so it is also a good time for New Zealand to put some real focus on how we feed New Zealanders.

Local food procurement is one of the best places to start—by ensuring our schools, hospitals, prisons and other institutions are purchasing locally produced food. This creates more reliable markets

72 Eat New Zealand, 'National Food System' https://eatnewzealand.nz/food-system/ accessed July 2025.

73 Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 'Leading food experts join Government food strategy to restore pride in British food' GOV.UK 21 March 2025 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/leading-food-experts-join-government-food-strategy-to-restore-pride-in-british-food accessed July 2025.

74 Scottish Government, 'National Good Food Nation Plan', 24 January 2024 https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-good-food-nation-plan/ accessed July 2025.

75 Government of Canada, 'The Food Policy for Canada', https://agriculture.canada.ca/en/department/initiatives/food-policy-canada accessed July 2025.

76 Julie Collins, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, 'Feeding Australia: Albanese Labor Government's plan to secure our food future', 4 March 2025, https://minister.agriculture.gov.au/collins/media-releases/feeding-australia.

for farmers through regular demand and reduced price volatility, while keeping money circulating in local economies. It also helps deliver fresh, nutritious food to more vulnerable New Zealanders, strengthening our health and wellbeing.[77]
The Government recently did this for wool, by mandating that public buildings use homegrown fibre.[78] For example, while the Government considers loosening the food safety restrictions on imported pork,[79] we could instead be mandating that our public institutions serve locally produced pork to support them against cheaper, lower quality imported pork.[80]

77 Angela Cliifford, Eat NZ, personal conversation.

78 Angela Clifford, 'We did it with wool—now for food.' Farmers Weekly 1 May 2025, https://www.farmersweekly.co.nz/opinion/we-did-it-with-wool-now-for-food/.

79 Sam Sacheva, 'Govt takes closer look at loosening US pork restrictions', Newsroom 12 May 2025 https://newsroom.co.nz/2025/05/12/govt-take-closer-look-at-loosening-us-pork-restrictions/.

80 Angela Clifford, 'We did it with wool—now for food.'

UTILISATION

Utilisation means having an adequate diet, clean water, sanitation and healthcare to reach a state of nutritional wellbeing where all physiological needs are met.

Vision

This dimension of food security embraces a fuller picture of how people and communities can thrive when we take a longer-term and wider view that captures the multiple but often tangible benefits of well-nourished communities. Every person has a human right to food security, and our country benefits hugely both in social and enormous ways when it is realised.

Barriers

SOCIAL INVESTMENT AND FOOD SECURITY

The restructuring of the Ka Ora, Ka Aka School Lunches programme during 2024 showed political decision-making that is divorced from the realities and experiences of school children, their schools and communities in responding to food insecurity.[81]

The unbalanced approach to the restructuring Ka Ora, Ka Ako has only served to demonstrate the short-sightedness of a 'cost-per-unit' approach to meeting the nutritional needs of school students. The restructured approach expressly discounted the wider social goals of the original programme, such as promoting local community employment and businesses, and encouraging the engagement of students and whānau in the food provision and preparation. In doing this, it also contradicts the very principles of social investment being promoted by the current government.

Social investment recognises, among other things, that interventions that help prevent hardship and poor social and health outcomes are highly valuable and good value for money. It attempts to quantify this over the lifetime of those likely to benefit from an intervention, but a truly rounded understanding of social investment recognises that those benefits accrue for the wider community and not simply for the individuals or family/whānau.

The social investment case for investing more into food security initiatives needs to draw in the first instance on the huge evidence of the health and social benefits of good nutrition. The health burden alone of poor nutrition is well-researched and documented, manifested in increased incidences of such health conditions as diabetes, heart disease and cancer. It is possible to put a dollar cost on this health burden and in turn to quantify in dollar terms the health benefits of reducing the burden of this health condition on our nation.

Explaining the paradox of both high food insecurity and accompanying high rates of obesity is complex, but the co-existence of food deserts and food swamps, as noted previously, makes for food environments that lead to much higher rates of diabetes and other conditions related to poor nutrition. Too little access to good-quality food, and the food that is available being predominantly poor-quality food highly processed with high sugar and fat content is the proverbial 'perfect storm'.

Diabetes is a health condition strongly influenced by patterns of nutrition and responsive to changes in individual and societal dietary patterns of eating. In other words, it is a genuinely preventable condition closely related to the quantity and quality of food people eat, and it can also be treated through changing to a healthier diet.

Diabetes rates are rising rapidly, with over 320,000 cases in 2024, an increase of 95,000 in just three years. By 2040, more than half a million New Zealanders are expected to have diabetes. Diabetes costs the country $2 billion annually, which is 8 percent of total health expenditure.[82] This could

81 Kelly Garton, Rachael Glassey, David Tipene-Leach, 'Evidence for free school lunches: The bigger picture benefits', 18 March 2024, Public Health Communication Centre https://www.phcc.org.nz/briefing/evidence-free-school-lunches-bigger-picture-benefits.

82 Diabetes New Zealand, 'New diabetes data confirms "worst case" predictions', 4 November 2024, https://www.diabetes.org.nz/news-and-update/worst-case-predictions.

nearly double by 2040.[83] These costs include, but are not limited to, surgeries to amputate, inability for those with the disease to work, hospital admissions and medication. Even a modest decrease in this annual cost through improved nutrition delivers quantifiable benefits. The annual cost of the school lunches programme at $300m would be recovered by just a 15 percent reduction of the health burden of this disease alone, without taking into account all the other conditions that would be impacted by better child nutrition.

The long-term benefits of better nutrition are identifiable and quantifiable. When decisions about funding for transformative policy initiatives are made to improve food insecurity, the future savings and benefits need to be accounted for in a meaningful way.

Health costs are only one part of the social investment case for food security. The impact of food hardship on achievement for students in schools has been identified as showing that students experiencing food poverty were up to four years behind their food-secure peers, even after taking account of socioeconomic deprivation.[84] The lifetime impacts of lower academic achievement on future earnings and other social outcomes are well understood.

Beyond these quantifiable benefits and costs are the less tangible benefits referred to throughout, such as improved social cohesion and improved mental wellbeing. Social investment analysis will have reached maturity when it is able to robustly assess non-quantifiable but measurable outcomes, such as improved mental wellbeing and social cohesion alongside the direct and indirect financial costs and benefits of food security in communities.

HUMAN RIGHT TO FOOD

We need also to understand that access to a healthy diet is a human right and something that our country is committed to through the international human rights agreements that have been signed, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICECCR) protocol.[85] This means food security simply needs to be taken as a given along with other human rights and woven into the political and social policy agenda. The only question should be, how are we as a country making this human right a reality for everyone?

Solutions

Free lunches in schools need to be embedded in our school system and widely available to all students potentially impacted by food insecurity. This would require the programme to be based on rounded social investment and wellbeing principles and analysis. Such an approach places the long-term benefits through improved health and social outcomes beside the significantly higher annual expenditure needed to ensure access to this programme for all students who need it.

Taxation of poor-quality food, such as sugar taxes, need to be seriously considered.[86] Hypothecating these taxes to fund food security and healthy food initiatives (such as free school lunches) would help make these taxes directly serve those affected by poor nutrition.

Reducing the cost of healthy food through targeted measures such as removing GST from fresh fruit and vegetables need further consideration. Combining both taxes on unhealthy food and tax reductions on healthy food could be a powerful combination of measures to impact food affordability and food security.[87]

83 Public Health Advisory Committee, *Rebalancing our food system*, p.15.

84 McKelvie Sebileau P, Swinburn B and de Seymour J (2025) The impact of food poverty on educational achievement: a New Zealand case study in global context. *Front. Educ*. 9:1520654. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2024.1520654.

85 Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission, 'Right to Food' https://tikatangata.org.nz/human-rights-in-aotearoa/right-to-food accessed July 2025.

86 Andrea Teng, Cristina Cleghorn, Louise Signal, Moira Smith, Lisa Te Morenga, Emilee Walby, Nick Wilson, 'Food and beverage taxes for a healthier diet: The Pacific experience' Public Health Communication Centre 31 January 2024 https://www.phcc.org.nz/briefing/food-and-beverage-taxes-healthier-diet-pacific-experience.

87 Elisa Pineda, Mathilde Gressier, Danying Li, Todd Brown, Sarah Mounsey, Jack Olney, Franco Sassi, 'Review: Effectiveness and policy implications of health taxes on foods high in fat, salt, and sugar,' Food Policy, Volume 123,2024,102599,ISSN 0306-9192, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0306919224000101.

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