

Food sovereignty and equitable food systems

Our Centre for Social Impact (CSI) insights papers provide a brief overview of the reports on research and analysis we undertake with our clients and partners.

This paper, **Food sovereignty and equitable food systems** draws on a report commissioned from CSI by Foundation North (FN) in late 2021 on the inequities in our food systems and opportunities to address these inequities. FN has seen increasing requests for support from food banks and sought to encourage system-level change that addressed inequitable access to good food, enabled Māori food sovereignty, supported Pacific food security, and encouraged local food systems. The report is based on a desktop review of the academic literature and information published by government and non-government organisations, and interviews with key informants in Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland) and Te Tai Tokerau (Northland).

Unsurprisingly, food insecurity is closely linked to other inequities present in our society such as income and housing. Addressing these wicked problems is necessary to enable equitable access to good food; however, other strategies can support and strengthen Māori food sovereignty, Pacific food security, and local food systems.

Food systems, security, and sovereignty

Food systems include all elements and activities related to producing and consuming food and the effects of these activities. Three key challenges affect food systems including food security, the livelihoods of food producers and others in the food chain, and the environmental impacts of food production and consumption.

Food systems in Aotearoa produce enough food to feed 20 million people. We also import enough for a further 10 million, yet people still go hungry daily. Commercial interests are favoured over community wellbeing, with waste, loss of productive land, and unsustainable practices driving up food prices. To date, attempts to respond to these issues have been fragmented at best, with 31 agencies in government having a role in Aotearoa's food systems but with no lead agency or cohesive approach identified.

Food security describes the ability of people to access sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs. In Aotearoa, we include the requirement for food that meets cultural needs in a socially acceptable way. In recent years, escalating housing and other costs of living have contributed to growing food insecurity, a trend seen globally. Food insecurity is disproportionately experienced by women and children, Māori whānau, and Pacific aiga. In the 2019/2020 year, it was estimated that 160,000 children aged 15 and younger ran out of food sometimes or often, some 20% of households in Aotearoa. The impact of insufficient food goes beyond hunger, with malnutrition, health, mental health, behavioural, and emotional concerns. Family stress, parental stress, and shame and isolation can also result from having inadequate food. Obesity, from low-cost, low-nutrition, energy-dense foods can also result from food insecurity.

Food sovereignty recognises that food is more than a commodity; rather food is significant in indigenous knowledge, communities' self-determination, sustainable livelihoods, and regenerative ecosystems. Māori food sovereignty puts Māori at the heart of food systems, enabling whānau and hapū-driven food production, distribution, and consumption based on environmental, social, cultural and economic sustainability.

The role of food banks

Food banks and other programmes that address the immediate impacts of food insecurity will continue to need support into the foreseeable future. Opportunities to build the capacity and capability of these organisations include the ability to connect and collaborate in local, regional, and national networks. Further, these organisations will seek support to understand and meet the needs of Māori whānau, Pacific aiga, and other communities in culturally appropriate ways, and to move away from Western-informed one-size-fits-all approaches.

Opportunities for change

There are four key opportunities for system-level change

- > Addressing inequity and income inadequacy
- > Enabling Māori food sovereignty
- > Supporting Pacific food security
- > Encouraging local food systems

Addressing inequity and income inadequacy

Food insecurity is a symptom of the structural inequities that have developed over generations under colonisation in Aotearoa. Shifting the conditions that create food insecurity must focus on improving incomes such as lifting government assistance levels and providing a living wage. Enabling tino rangatiratanga and mana motuhake is a first step towards addressing and redressing the impacts of colonisation.

Opportunities:

- > Support initiatives that promote income adequacy for communities disproportionately experiencing food insecurity (Māori, Pacific peoples, households made up of children, young people, and women), such as a living wage, raising benefit levels, affordable housing, and lowering the cost of living.
- > Prioritising Māori and Pacific food security and sovereignty (see further below).

Enabling Māori food sovereignty

Food sovereignty can be enabled through protecting, reconnecting, and re-establishing engagement with whenua, moana, māra kai, and other traditional food sources. Supporting the advancement and sharing of mātauranga Māori relating to traditional practices of growing, farming, producing, preparing and consuming kai is also critical, alongside access to Māori food and seeds.

There is significant opportunity to develop the Māori food economy in support of access to and control of affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate foods; as well as offering value (revenue and jobs) across the supply chain that benefits Māori whānau and hapū. Investment opportunities in this space are significant and include research and development around commercialising new food products and technologies, and development and scaling of Māori-led food products and companies. Partnerships will be key in this area, with opportunities to partner with whānau, hapū, iwi, Māori-led organisations, tertiary providers and more.

Opportunities:

- Supporting iwi and Māori-led initiatives that protect and restore Māori control over kai.
- Supporting grassroots organisations/projects engaged in kai sovereignty to connect, network and grow their capacity.
- Using impact investment to help build the Māori food economy, supporting R&D and growing the commercial capacity of Māori-led regenerative farming and aquaculture.
- Partnering with education providers, wānanga, and marae to invest in offering education opportunities (e.g. micro-credentials) that build whānau knowledge around kai and create education pathways towards resilient jobs in the food sector.

Increase food security for Pacific peoples

Support for Pacific peoples to access good food is also critical. This can range from sharing knowledge of growing and preparing traditional foods, to more collective approaches to the food system that centre aiga and community relationships.

Opportunities:

- Investing in initiatives that raise Pacific household income adequacy.
- Investing in Pacific-led initiatives that enable access to healthy, nutritious and culturally relevant foods, particularly targeting areas of South Auckland where Pacific populations are high and access to good food is limited.
- Investing in Pacific-led initiatives that support collective systems of food production and distribution e.g. Pacific food hubs.

Disrupt current systems and support local food systems

Current food systems that favour commercial practices will not change without advocacy around issues such as the value of a national food strategy, the impact of the supermarket duopoly, removing GST on fresh fruit and vegetables, and legislation to reduce waste. Each of these has the potential for positive disruption to current systems nationally. Wider coordination from Government is needed, however, to align the interests of the food, agriculture, health, and environment sectors in Aotearoa.

Returning a focus to people and communities at the centre of food systems is also needed, with recent research identifying the need to address food systems at the local level to grow food security. This could include, for example, incentivising local food systems and short supply chains that connect consumers with growers and producers. Supporting local food systems to be more connected and environmentally sustainable builds food security and sovereignty.

Opportunities:

- Investing in community-led food systems that are clearly linked to building community resilience and food sovereignty, including scaling and replicating existing local food models (e.g. food hubs), connecting solutions, sharing intellectual property (IP) and building food networks/ecosystems.
- Advocacy (direct to government, or by investing in community voices driving food sovereignty) – including a national food strategy representative of community aspirations and charging one ministry with delivering on this strategy.
- Impact investment into future food companies that offer social, environmental and cultural benefits, particularly opportunities within the Māori food economy.

Food sovereignty and equitable food systems – responses in action

Example responses

- **Kore Hiakai Zero Hunger Collective.** In 2019, the Kore Hiakai Zero Hunger Collective was formed by six NGOs (ACM, The Salvation Army, VisionWest, Wellington City Mission, Christchurch City Mission and Council of Christian Social Services) to eliminate food insecurity in Aotearoa. Kore Hiakai has a partnership with MSD and is connected to over 300 foodbanks and community food organisations across the country. Kore Hiakai is supporting systems change by driving collaboration and collective advocacy for change through the publication of research and advocacy papers, and symposium. Focus areas have included income adequacy, the Aotearoa Standard Food Parcel Measure nutritional guidance, and 'Mana to Mana' principles of practice for community food distribution.
- **Te Waka Kai Ora** is the National Māori Organic Authority of Aotearoa, a non-profit organisation that acts as kaitiaki for the Hua Parakore Indigenous Validation – the world's first Indigenous verification system for Kai Ātua or Pure Food (food that is free from genetic modification, nanotechnology, chemicals and pesticides and congruent with Māori cultural practices).
- **Papatūānuku Marae** is a hub of sustainable food and food sovereignty initiatives. This includes: an organic farm that produces tonnes of kumara, heirloom seeds and other organic food; Kai Ika – an initiative that redirects fish heads intended for landfill to use as food by local whānau, as well as for learning projects on the marae; and community learning programmes based around kai, mātauranga Māori and sustainability.
- **New Zealand Food Network** works to increase the supply of food to community food services by distributing bulk surplus and donated food from food producers, growers and wholesalers through to food hubs around New Zealand on an 'as required' basis.
- **Koanga Institute** seed bank is a non-profit organisation based in Wairoa seeking to support food resilience and communities' self-determination through protecting and developing heritage plants, researching and sharing knowledge of regenerative food practices. The institute has brought together NZ's largest collection of heritage seeds (800+) over a 30-year period. It has an online knowledge bank to share learning about regenerative practices including seed saving, growing nutrient dense food, maramataka and food forests.

Further reading

- For the full report and list of sources, view the Food Sovereignty and Equitable Food Systems report on the Foundation North website: <https://www.foundationnorth.org.nz/downloads/assets/1137/Food%20Sovereignty%20and%20Equitable%20Food%20Systems.pdf>.
- Auckland City Mission. (2019). Shining the light on food insecurity in Aotearoa. Retrieved from <https://www.aucklandcitymission.org.nz/what-we-do/research/>.
- Weave Ltd. (2021). Papatoetoe Food Hub – transforming local food systems. Auckland: The Southern Initiative Healthy Families Team. Retrieved from <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cf74c8f2829e20001db724f/t/615122798e6b8do91c4a088/1632707207029/Papatoetoe+Food+Hub+Report+FINAL.pdf>.