



Reframing the narrative: A call for a human rights-centred food system in Aotearoa

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Summary

It is often claimed that 'our food system is broken', and this is the reason for the high price of foods and inequities of access people currently experience in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ). However, the modern food system in NZ is not broken, rather it is working exactly as it has been designed, based on the priorities given to it, namely facilitating trade.

In this Briefing, we discuss the complexities of the modern food system in NZ and the impacts these have on population health.

We highlight international best practice examples of systemic levers that could be adapted for NZ, to support a resilient food system, and why core to that is putting human health ahead of profit.

It's time to redesign NZ's food system so that it is sustainable and balances health, environmental, economic, and social goals - designed with an emphasis on food security, nutrition, and equity of access.

NZ's food system has shifted towards one that prioritises trade and profit over human health

Shaped by various economic, environmental, and cultural shifts, NZ's food system has evolved significantly since first settlement. Arriving in an environment without natural staples suitable for humans, Māori developed sophisticated practices incorporating the foods they had brought with them and hunting and fishing, with the traditional sciences of mahinga kai and kaitiakitanga to balance the interconnectedness of whenua and moana with population health.¹

Colonisation throughout the 19th century and 20th century transformed the food system. The focus shifted to building an agricultural export economy with dairy, meat, wine and wool driving economic growth.²

Today agriculture and horticulture industries in NZ produce a lot of food.³ Yet food insecurity and diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, diet-related cancers, stroke, and inflammation-related illnesses are worsening, and many households regularly run out of food.^{4,5}

This is a direct infringement of Article three of Te Tiriti o Waitangi as our founding document, and a breach of the right to adequate food.^{6,7}

Our food system promotes foods that lead to poor health outcomes

How nations prioritise their domestic food supply vs. exports shapes the societal value of food. Anglo-American colonial states such as NZ tend to favour free markets and commodified food systems. Here, regulatory settings strongly incentivise exports but lack similar incentives for domestic food supply.⁸

These priorities have led to an increased availability of cheap, imported, nutrient-poor, highly processed foods, while pathways to export are supported by the system for our

locally produced foods.⁴ As a result, healthier, locally produced foods have become more expensive than less nutritious, imported ones.⁹

The outcome for many in NZ is budget-motivated food choices, often resulting in poorer diets and an increase in national food insecurity. NZ produces high-quality food but consumes poorer-quality diets. The economic and health costs are high. Diet-related inequities and NCDs are the greatest preventable burden to our nation.¹⁰ Modelling shows an economic rationale for investing in preventative measures to build healthier food environments and improve access to healthy food.^{11,12}

Strong leadership is required to redesign our food system

In NZ, responsibility for health sits outside of and disconnected from the system responsible for producing and selling food. The food production system has no remit for preventing dietary-related NCDs, while the health system has little influence over food production and distribution.

This disconnect has been compounded by successive governments' reluctance to rebalance policy and regulatory priorities. They have also failed to take proportionate action to meet their international legal obligation to ensure the right to adequate food for all^{6,10} and provide its associated health benefits and healthcare cost savings.

From a public health perspective, a food system that does not provide equitable access to nutritionally adequate, culturally acceptable food as a human right does not value the environmental health necessary to produce healthy food. It also disregards indigenous knowledge and Te Tiriti obligations. It is an example of market failure by design.

Redesign is needed to balance a healthy domestic food supply with support for tradable commodities. This would align with global calls, including the United Nations, to repurpose food and agricultural policies to make healthy diets more affordable and accessible.¹³

Transforming the food system requires action across all levels of society, including producers, the community, industry, and individuals. Around the world, visionary and effective government leadership has been essential to driving change.

Reconnecting food production with public health outcomes

The food system in NZ operates under two treaties.

- **Te Tiriti o Waitangi**,¹⁴ principally concerned with the protection of natural food sources, access to them and sovereignty over them.
- **The Joint Food Standards Treaty**,¹⁵ which underpins our joint system of food regulation which facilitates trade under the Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ) Act. (See [Appendix 1](#))

The conflicting goals of these two treaties in relation to providing food for health are yet to be resolved in a way that enables a resilient export-based economy alongside a resilient, healthy domestic food supply.

New Zealand can learn from global leadership to promote the right to

food

New Zealand, like many nations, continues to focus too heavily on individual responsibility for food choices, attempting to tackle a complex systemic problem with overly simplistic, single-action measures. NZ uses food labelling (Health Star Ratings, which also encourage some reformulation), while overseas we see taxes on high fat, sugar, and salt foods. While these are valuable tools,^{10,16} they are unable to produce effective system change alone.

A recent report by the Salvation Army proposes solutions used elsewhere in the world that NZ could look to undertake to effect change across the food system to address food insecurity (see [Appendix 2](#)).¹⁷ For example:

- **Mexico's Law on Adequate and Sustainable Nutrition** strengthens the constitutional right to food by creating a legislative framework for nutritious, sufficient, and quality food, implemented through existing government structures.¹⁶
- **Brazil's National School Food Programme (PNAE)** uses procurement pathways to support local, healthy, and sustainable food systems while boosting local economies.¹⁸

These international examples show what more comprehensive, systemic change can achieve, and also that NZ is being left behind.

What this Briefing adds

- The food system we have built to facilitate trade has unintended negative consequences for human health.
- It is timely to review our social contract as a food-producing nation and reconsider whether our system, which privileges profit and trade over human health, remains fit for purpose in the current global context.
- NZ's food system operates under two treaties, with obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi largely overlooked

Implications for policy and practice

- The Government needs to prioritise the right to accessible, appropriate, and adequate food by placing food and health at the centre of all related policies, ahead of the commodification of food, and ensuring the right to food in legislation.
- Honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi at a political level would assist system and policy design and enable mana whakahaere and mana motuhake for kai sovereignty, making it easier for civic participation in food system reform at a local level and having positive implications for all.
- National policy changes need to include support for thriving, viable local food economies (including incentives) with compliance and regulatory measures to match the risks and realities of local production for local sale.

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Appendix 1

Food Regulation in New Zealand

For the past 30 years, our food system has been regulated by an independent trans-Tasman body set up under an international treaty, Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ). FSANZ programme of work plays a crucial role in ensuring food safety, quality, and nutrition, regulating food labeling, additives, contaminants, and other aspects that impact public health.¹⁹

The FSANZ Act is currently under review with the focus of streamlining its processes to reduce barriers and cost to industry. The regulatory options will weaken the consideration of the public health impacts of the commodified domestic food supply and further promote the interests of corporate scale producers and trade.²⁰

While FSANZ contributes to food safety and regulation, there is an increasing call for greater alignment of its work with sustainability goals, particularly in light of the environmental and health concerns due to the current food system. Currently FSANZ does not review or regulate the food supply for its ability to support human or ecological health. There have been many calls for the food regulatory system to be rebalanced for this, and not just for profit.^{21,22,23}

How the New Zealand and Australia Food Regulation System Works

The food regulation system for **Australia and New Zealand** is a **joint system** established under a **bilateral treaty** *Agreement Between the Government of Australia and the Government of New Zealand Concerning a Joint Food Standards System* (1995),²⁴ designed to ensure food safety and harmonized food standards across both countries.

1. The Treaty: Agreement Between Australia and New Zealand (1995)

In 1995 New Zealand and Australia ratified a joint treaty between the two sovereign nations.²⁴ This treaty established a **joint food standards system** (excluding some areas like food produced for export and dietary supplements in NZ).

- The **purpose** of the Treaty: Harmonise food standards to reduce trade barriers and improve public health.
- The **scope** of the Treaty: Covers food composition, labeling, and contaminants.

2. Food Standards Australia New Zealand

Implementation of the system required the creation of some shared institutions and

processes for developing and implementing food standards.

The principal institution established was Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ),²⁵ whose principal role includes drafting and managing the Food Standards Code.²⁶

- **FSANZ Role:** Develop and reviews food standards gazetted in the Food Standards Code
- **FSANZ was established under:** *Food Standards Australia New Zealand Act 1991 (Cth)*
- **FSANZ responsibilities:**
 - Risk assessment and scientific analysis
 - Drafting food standards
 - Public consultation
 - Providing recommendations to the ministers
 - Updating the Food Standards Code
 - Gazetting approved standards and amendments

3. Ministerial Forum on Food Regulation (Food Ministers' Meeting)

FSANZ reports to the Ministerial Forum, whose membership is made up of Health or Food Ministers from Australian states/territories and New Zealand. FSANZ sets its own priorities and direction, which is endorsed by the Food Ministers Meeting (FMM).

The role of the Food Ministers Meeting:

- To endorse or request review of standards developed by FSANZ
- To set policy guidelines for FSANZ consideration in setting its priorities and making its regulatory decisions

4. Implementation Bodies

The Food Standards Code is then implemented by a number of bodies known in the food regulatory world as the 'jurisdictions'.

- **In Australia:** States and territories enforce food laws under *Model Food Provisions*
- **In New Zealand:** Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) is responsible for implementing the Food Standards Code

5. The Food Regulation Standing Committee

Key to understanding how the food regulatory system works is to understand the pivotal role of the Food Regulation Standing Committee (FRSC). The Food Ministers Meeting is supported by FRSC (27) who act as **both** the secretariat to the FMM and provides policy advice to the FMM. This means that in practice, new guidance for the direction of the FSANZ work programme arises from this body (28).

The FRSC supports the Food Ministers' Meeting (29) through:

- coordinating and providing policy advice
- studying and assessing potential food regulatory issues and working out appropriate policy options
- ensuring a consistent approach to implementing and enforcing food standards across Australia and New Zealand.

To work out a policy response to a food issue, FRSC considers:

- the nature and extent of the issue, and related risks
- different options such as non-intervention, self-regulation, co-regulation and, if needed, regulation
- how to coordinate the response across the joint food system.

As needed, FRSC creates working groups to help develop specific policies.

Consistency in implementing food standards is ensured through the Implementation Subcommittee for Food Regulation (ISFR).³⁰

Appendix 2

Global examples of leading systemic policies

Food Sovereignty as a framework

Food sovereignty goes beyond food security or sufficiency; it calls for a fundamental shift in economic and social relationships, emphasising solidarity over competition and shared responsibility for outcomes. It is not a one-size-fits-all policy, but a collective commitment to creating better and just food systems that enable community action. Ultimately, food sovereignty celebrates and centres human health, agency and collective humanity.³³

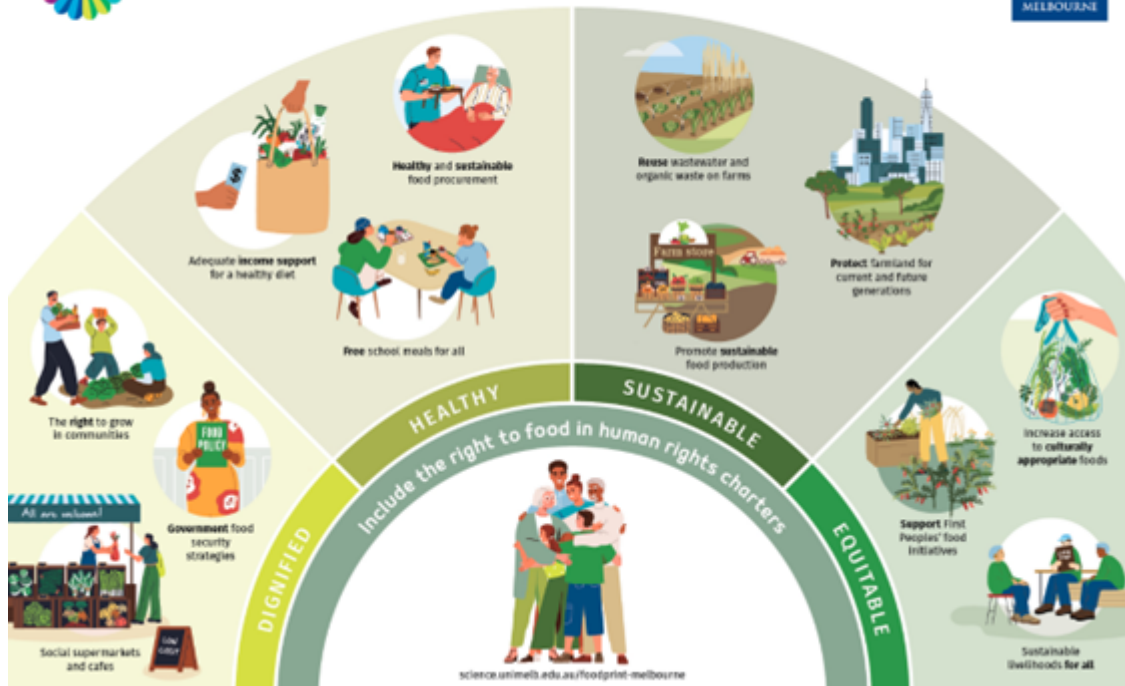
There is no escaping that food is intrinsically political, across the spectrum from its production to consumption and waste. Therefore, it stands to reason that some national governing bodies are starting to accept they have a role to play in effecting change across the food system, in order to support positive change for all involved.

Globally, several countries have taken action to embed food sovereignty into their political structures, national policies or constitutions. Starting with Ecuador in 2008,³⁴ followed by nations like Senegal, Mali, Bolivia, Nepal, Venezuela, and Egypt.³⁵

Australia - planning for resilient food systems

Leading food systems researchers in Australia (NZs trading and regulatory partner in food systems) have developed a toolkit to support the planning of resilient food systems.³⁶ Part of this model, speaks to enacting a human rights approach to adequate food, at all levels of policy, planning and community, as displayed in Figure A1.

Figure A1. Enacting the human right to adequate food (University of Melbourne)³⁶



The Australian Government has also recently decreed that they will work alongside farmers, producers and communities to write the strategy that will support food security and resilience, whilst minimising price unpredictability.^{37,38}

School Food Programme and Government Department Procurement Policies

Many countries, including Denmark, Brazil, India, Kenya, Ethiopia, Nepal, and Ghana have implemented institutional policies or supported pilot programmes that support schools, or government agencies to ensure that increased amounts of food used in their programmes are from local producers and are working to combat nutrition related health issues.^{39,40,41}

The Brazilian National School Food Programme (PNAE), which states that a minimum of 30% of food purchased must be via local procurement, remains one of the most effective and well-established globally (41). In 2025 Brazil announced that they were further strengthening their policy by reducing the ultra-processed foods on school menus from 20% to 15% and in 2026 it will further reduce to 10%.⁴²

The Netherlands - Circular Food Economy

The National Government for the Netherlands is aiming for the Dutch economy to be fully circular by 2050, within this are plans for shifts within the food and agriculture system that will focus on the local production economy, waste, packaging, and systems to minimise resource depletion and environmental impact.⁴³

Global Research Recommendations

In the EAT-Lancet paper, released in October 2025,⁴⁴ the overarching message remains that food systems and their design are central to the ability, or inability, of populations to access a healthy diet. The far-reaching consequences of food systems on public health outcomes, environmental health, and social and economic systems make it imperative that globally, policy makers need to be re-framing towards a more just food system that centres

human and environmental health.

New Zealand calls to action

Several recent reports have already detailed how NZ should be making changes to address the worsening food security issues, and the results of pure commodification of our food system, without thought to just access or human health.^{17,45}

The Salvation Army report 'Ending Food Insecurity',¹⁷ provides a succinct picture of how NZ has lost its way in moving away from being human or values-centred when it comes to food provision. It provides a useful map of solutions (as detailed in Figure A2). While these are aimed at re-orienting to support those who currently suffer the most food insecurity, it would benefit all in NZ with respect to population health outcomes, and would better honour te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Figure A2. A Map of Solutions for the Food System to support food security in NZ.¹⁷

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.

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.

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

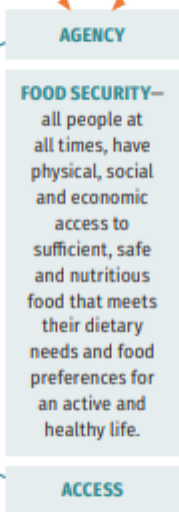
Government hardship grants are currently inadequate to respond to short-term presenting need. Government needs to ensure that all have access to adequate income whether they are in employment or not.

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.

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.

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.

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.



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