Aotearoa, the long cupboard

Part 7: Food Insecurity in New Zealand

We can build the Zero Hunger Generation in our new COVID-19 World.

Every child fed everyday at every school.

We can build the Zero Hunger Generation in our new COVID-19 World

Becky Little and Laurie Wharemate-Keung (MNZM) Eat Right Be Bright and Feed the Need

"I don't want to see people struggling with food, don't want to see people struggling with education. I want them to follow with their education, keep going with school and not to drop out. And to have a good future."

"Lara" 1

COVID-19 has upended the world for all of us. We have all had to work together to fight a pandemic that has targeted our most vulnerable loved ones. The potential impact has been terrifying. But the unity required to fight it and provide for our most vulnerable has been inspiring. It has also prioritised the urgent need to get food to everyone, whoever you are and wherever you are, safely. As we move to Level 2 and a less restricted world, we can build on this unity to act positively. We can create the Zero Hunger Generation.

Zero Hunger is a tantalising future for Aotearoa and it is not a pie-in-the-sky dream. COVID-19 has added to its urgent necessity, but it is a future to which we have long made a commitment to achieve. In 2015, New Zealand along with the rest of the global community adopted the Sustainable Development Goals to improve people's lives by 2030. Goal 2 of Zero Hunger pledges to end hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition. In making this commitment, we explicitly acknowledged that not only do the consequences of food insecurity cause suffering and poor health, they also compromise progress for people in education and employment.

Zero Hunger is also a goal that, frankly, can be achieved - especially here in Aotearoa. We waste about 229,000 tonnes of fresh vegetables a year and this is just a third of the total food waste in New Zealand. As Professor

Elaine Rush noted in her brilliant article in this series, ² ³, we export enough food to feed our population 4 times over. But quite simply, these foods are not available or accessible to everyone every day and this has knock on consequences for all of us.

Zero Hunger is also a goal that, frankly, can be achieved - especially here in Aotearoa.

Last year, in times that currently seem like a parallel universe, the Prime Minister announced that a Free and Healthy School Lunch Programme was a key part of the Child Youth and Wellbeing Strategy and the first trials started at the beginning of this new school year. Under the recent Budget 2020, the Government provided funding to expand this programme to reach an additional 200,000 children. It seems that we have reached a national consensus that feeding children at school is simply the right thing to do.



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^{2.} New Zealand Domestic Production: The Growing Story, Horticulture New Zealand, 2017

^{3. &}quot;Fat, Famished or Starved in a Land of Plenty", Prof Elaine Rush (AUT), 2019.

So why is this something we need to keep talking about, especially now with so many pressing concerns hitting our economy in the wake of this pandemic? Is a free school lunch for all really going to seriously contribute to greater food security for children? The short answer is: Yes! If it is done right, with informed planning and care.

This article outlines how a universal, centrally-secured, healthy school lunch programme can kickstart a food revolution empowering children, their families and communities. By adopting best-practice principles uncovered in international and domestic research, listening to children and whanau in Aotearoa about their lived experiences of food poverty, we can build a thriving future for all tamariki in New Zealand. We can create the Zero Hunger Generation.

A rights and ethics foundation puts empowerment at the heart of any programme

When we talk about food in schools it is rarely talked about in terms of rights or ethics. In any scenario, ethics are usually just tagged on at the end. You can't eat them, right?

Wrong. To give sustenance to any body of a school food system, it must be underpinned by an ethical and rights based approach. This ensures that advancing dignity, empowerment and wellbeing for our tamariki sits firmly at its heart.

Childrens' rights

"Don't ignore kids voices, 'cos their voices are the future."

"Lola" 4

It is indisputable that every child has a right to an education based on equality of opportunity and that every child has a right to health through access to nutritious food. These are rights ⁵ that New Zealand agreed to abide by 25 years ago when it ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child. So it is not just a case of granting children a bit of food at school. They are entitled to the provision of nutritious food at school in order to access their education and maintain their health - as of right.

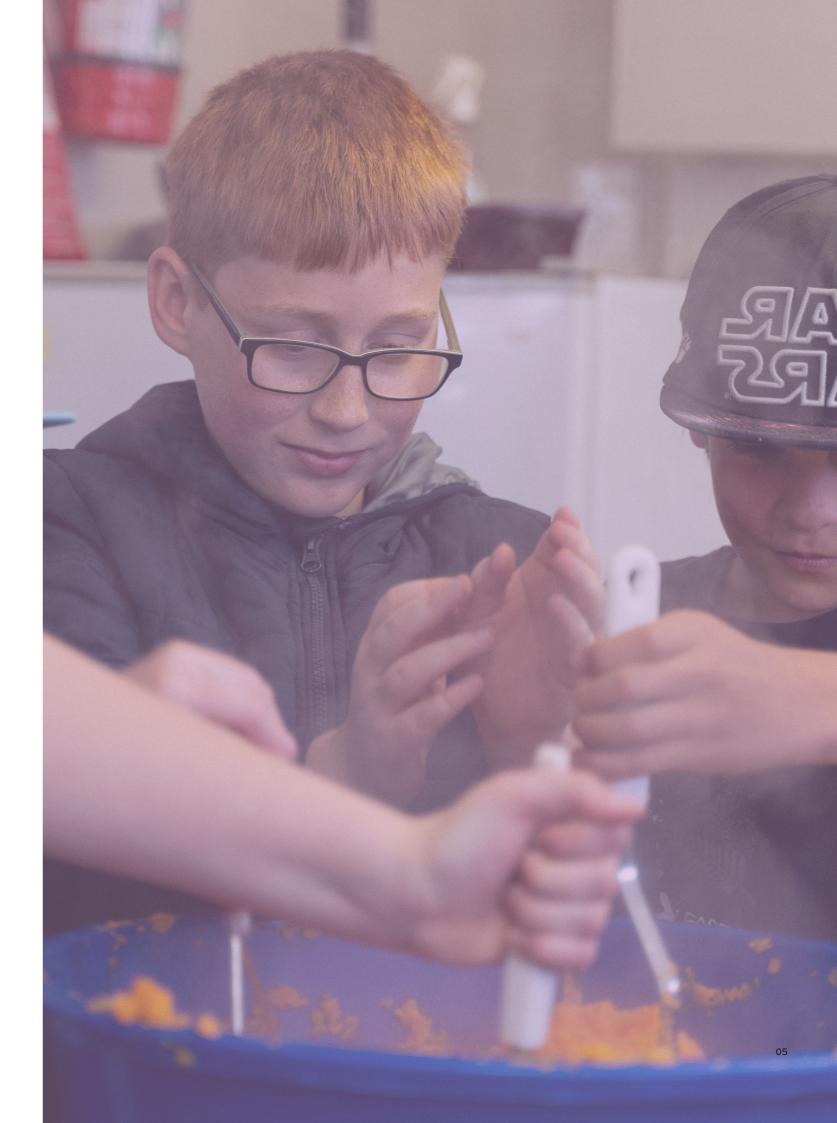
Ethical approach

Contrary to the view that 'Hogwarts-style school dinners' is not part of our culture and not suitable in a New Zealand context, food is and always has been at the very heart of who we are and how we function in Aotearoa: In mind, body and spirit.

A national school food programme embeds the tikanga Māori ethic of manaakitanga in the educational environment. Manaakitanga is the process of showing respect, care and kindness in order to 'aki' or strengthen, acknowledge and honour a person's 'mana', their power and value. We often see it expressed at marae and Māori homes when food is eaten whereby everyone is offered food and it is not 'tika' or right that anyone goes without because everyone has value. Children going without while their peers eat has the opposite effect on their mana, their power, their value. It depresses it, often causing them to feel less worthy. Manaakitanga is the core reason why a national school food programme is vital, showing that all children are valued and no-one should miss out. So, by explicitly underpinning a national school food programme with the power of manaakitanga, we build on an inclusive "foundation for cultivating relationships of kindness, aroha and empowerment, relationships which strengthen body and soul and are the backbone of strengthening community". 6

Any rights based, ethical school food programme in practice must:

- 1. Be secure: Central resources must be secured by legislation. Guaranteeing stability through a mechanism for annual funds and central coordination with clear regulatory policy.
- 2. Have a universal, whole school approach: Ensuring it is socially inclusive and non-stigmatising emphasising kindness, aroha and unity where every child is fed every day, everywhere.
- 3. Be safe and have clear objectives: To have the best outcomes for learning, wellbeing and the empowerment of our children, any programme needs to have National School Food Standards, as part of a National Food Policy, in order to ensure the food is healthy, nutritious and appropriate health and safety procedures are observed.
- 4. Have dignity: The food consumed by children must be sourced with dignity (as locally and sustainably as possible to empower the community and protect the environment) and made with the dignity of paid labour.



⁴ Name changed of young teen, "Unheard Voices, Unheard Stories: Videos of young people in training with Feed the Need", Feed The Need and Siobhan Nathan, Unitec

⁵ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 24 and 28.

[&]quot;The power of Manaakitanga: The socially-inclusive practise of sharing food amongst high school students", Therese Luxton, Child Poverty Action Group, 10 January 2019.

Both acts empower tamariki eating the food and the wider community with jobs and employment.

5. Community dialogue and relationships: The programme must meaningfully have input from children and whanau so that it is appropriate for the needs of their community.

The need is massive

"Probably at age, age of 12, I started realising the struggle, I was going through.

"Went to school with just \$2 or \$1.50 at least 'cos that's all, that's all I needed to get something small to eat and bus home and back so, um, growing up I think it was just money, the struggle that our family had, was just all money."

"Gabriel"

More than 160,000 children live in households without enough food or the variety of foods that are required for good health. That is 1 in 5 children in Aotearoa.8

Kidscan have said that they think approximately 22% of all children in decile 1-4 schools,⁹ where they distribute their non-perishable food packages, need lunches during a week. Anecdotally, we have been told by teachers in all deciles that children come to school without lunch and they often feed children from their own pockets.

These figures will increase in the wake of COVID-19. The City Missions and Salvation Army in the major centres have already reported that demand for their food banks has increased dramatically - up 100% in Auckland, up as much as 305% in Christchurch and up a staggering 400% in Wellington. Many people are coming to food banks for help for the first time .

In just¹⁰ the first month of lockdown 33,000 more people went on a benefit, bringing the total number of people on all benefits to 335,000.

It is reported that the Ministry of Social Development is preparing for this amount to double in response to the expected tidal wave of unemployment in the wake of the pandemic.¹¹

Families are going to be hit hard for some time to come and the same tired, old excuses are simply not going to cut it anymore.

Impacts on children - health and wellbeing, their emotional heartland

"It was embarrassing, like, it was really embarrassing having our morning tea and our lunch...and then everyone taking their lunchboxes out, like, I didn't even have a lunch box, I didn't even have a lunchbox to take out of my bag.

"I would just go sit outside and, um, hoping that someone would see me struggling, but they didn't."

"Lara"12

7 Name changed of young teen, "Unheard Voices, Unheard Stories: Videos of young people in training with Feed the Need", Feed The Need and Siobhan Nathan, Unitec

8. Child Poverty Monitor 2018

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- 9 "Do-good businesses must prove their heart", Rob Stock, Stuff, 21 July 2018.
- "Coronavirus: Foodbank demand soars during COVID-19 pandemic", Hannah Konast, Newshub, 6 April 2020; "Kai and Covid-19" by Dr Kira, Massey University on www. massey.ac.nz; "COVID-19 Social Impact Dashboard", Salvation Army, 24 April 2020 on www.salvationarmy.org.nz.
- 11 "Government prepping for 300,000 new beneficiaries leaked documents", Guyon Espinor, RNZ, 5 May 2020

12 Name changed of young teen, "Unheard Voices, Unheard Stories: Videos of young people in training with Feed the Need", Feed The Need and Siobhan Nathan, Unitec.

Food poverty and the lack of daily access to nutritious food inevitably impacts on the health and wellbeing of our children and their ability to fulfil their potential.

Cheap food which satisfies our hunger is often high in energy but low in the nutrients we need to fuel and nourish our bodies and minds.

This all contributes to children being sick more, leading to more days off school. It contributes to children being obese yet also malnourished at the same time. 1 in 3 children in New Zealand are overweight or obese and New Zealand is now the third most obese nation in the ¹³ OECD. Yet, it has been reported that 1 in 3 children admitted to Starship Hospital are¹⁴ malnourished to some degree. It also impacts on their education. We now know it is common¹⁵ for children to miss school and so miss out on

13 Obesity Statistics from The NZ Health Survey 2017/18, website of Ministry of Health NZ. 19 N

- Obesity Update 2017, OECD.
 "Number of New Zealand children hospitalised with malnutrition doubles as food costs bite" by Kirsty Johnston, NZ Herald, 19 Sept 2017.
- 16 "Hunger for Learning: Nutritional barriers to children's education" by Donna Wynd, Child Poverty Action Group, Jul 2011.
- 17 Impact of a school meal programme on the dietary intake of children, aged 9-11yrs old, in a low decile school in South Auckland, New Zealand", N. Walia, MSc Thesis, Massey University, p108.
- 18 "Child poverty requires radical long term solutions", R.O'Connell, J Brannen, A.Knight (UCL, UK), BMJ Aug 2018.

their education due to the stigma of having no¹⁶ food to bring.

More importantly, food insecurity affects a child in their emotional heartland. In 2016, research in Auckland of the school food programme run by the charity Feed the Need showed how the provision of a regular lunch to the children meant much more than 'just a hot meal'. It gave them a sense of emotional safety. This is how a group of researchers put it in the British¹⁷ Medical Journal: "Moreover, food poverty has social and psychological dimensions that are especially important for children. While parents' sacrifices can protect their children from food shortages, the indirect effects of food poverty penetrate deeply into the "emotional heartland" of children's personal and family lives".¹⁸

"Growing up was...it was....it was really hard to, like, go school without any food, especially when my parents are struggling as well.....There were times when I missed out on school activities. Kids have food and, like, you're just sitting there with no food. Makes you think, at that age, their parents love them, I wonder if my parents love me."

"Lola". 19

Charities cannot fill this gap

In the last few years, a number of charities, not for profit and for profit organisations, and some schools themselves have started feeding children at school in order to cater to this need. However, none of these organisations and businesses have the capacity to reach every child in need and that need keeps growing dramatically. These organisations cannot be expected to shoulder the burden of feeding children at schools in perpetuity, when we stand to benefit as a country from well-fed children.²⁰

There's also very little coordination of the current effort in terms of the food donated or the schools serviced. All of these organisations are vulnerable to changes in fortune, such as the one we are experiencing due to COVID-19, as businesses no longer can supply produce/food/equipment/ space free of charge (take your pick, really).²¹

Current programmes also target low decile schools and

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- 20. Kidscan were informed by Schools that, for the 2018 school year, 31,000 children in schools they supply required food. In 2017 that number was 25,000 conversation between Kidscan and Eat Right Be Bright.
- 21. One charity we know has had to stop providing its hot meals to 7 schools because the lease on its kitchen expired and they did not have the funds to extend it. Also see "Poverty tackling free lunch set to end as toll mounts on founding chef", Sam Sherwood, Stuff, 17 July 2018

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"He said to me.....does that mean we are really hard up?"²²

On a really concerning level, at the moment anyone can wander into a school and start giving out food to children. There is no oversight, no regulations, no food standards, no accountability whatsoever as to the type or quality of food being provided to children. Any commitment to following health and nutrition guidelines is purely voluntary.

So, the current landscape of food in schools is unreliable and unregulated and doesn't reach all the children that need it. Fundamentally, this breaches our children's existing right to access safe, healthy and secure food.

The positive benefits of school food programmes

A national school lunch programme is a **long term social protection** investment and **safety net for children**. It is also a particular blindspot in New Zealand's social protection systems. Around 80% of the world feeds its children at school via national, centrally resourced school²³ feeding programmes. These countries have long understood that these programmes have multiple benefits and are important tools in protecting the most vulnerable. They are seen as vital vehicles to:

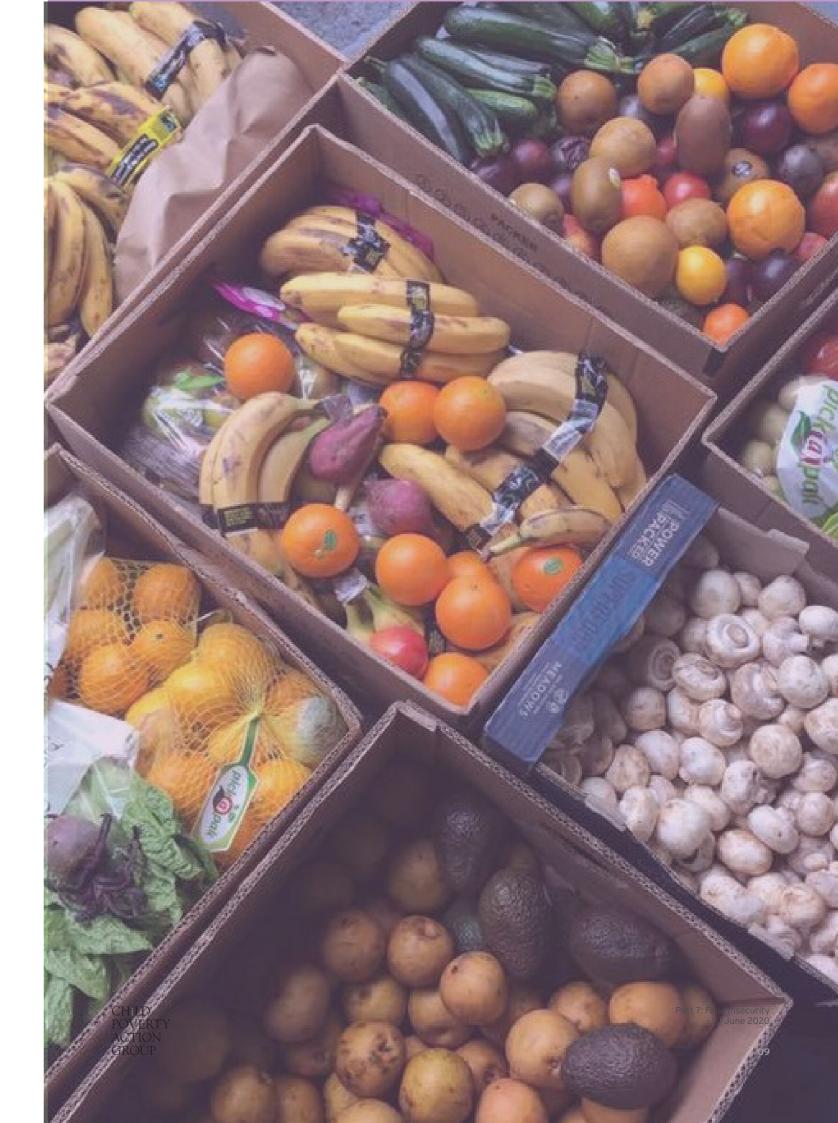
- Provide income support to families through the provision of food.
- Tackle food poverty for children by ensuring the provision of one meal a day.
- Contribute to their learning by increasing children's access to their education.
- Maintain and support their nutritional status and overall health.
- Protect children from the full impact of economic shocks.

So let's be clear on this. Children in New Zealand have no equivalent social protection system and safety net that their global peers enjoy.

The global community has also held the view that national school food programmes which are healthy and nutritious have the capacity to make a significant contribution to breaking inter-generational poverty cycle in the long term as they:

- Provide income support to families, which assists in easing their financial stress and support family wellbeing.
- Contribute to a child's readiness to learn and ability to participate in their own educational process through better health.
- Better health leads to a better education (by being less sick and able to be at school more) leading to an increased ability and opportunity to work and earn long term.

Some of this has already been borne out by the school



^{22.} From a focus group of parents in "Impact of a school meal programme on the dietary intake of children, aged 9-11yrs old, in a low decile school in South Auckland, New Zealand", N. Walia, MSc Thesis, Massey University, p106.

²³ See "State of School Feeding Worldwide 2013", World Food Programme.

^{24&}quot;Live: Greens James Shaw Say Party Wanted More for Welfare In 50b Covid19 Budget Spend", Stuff, 14 May 2020.

^{25 &}quot;The GSF Sourcebook, Executive Summary

lunch trials underway as part of the Government's Child Youth and Wellbeing Strategy. The Minister of Education is quoted as saying "They've received a lot of feedback from healthy food in schools participants, most said it had a huge impact.....Afternoons were more productive from a learning perspective because children were eating more at lunch. The normal supports for struggling families haven't been available during Covid-19, so this programme takes the weight off families because they know their kids will be safe and well-fed at school and ready to learn."24

Food in school programmes can empower communities:

In all the discussion in New Zealand surrounding the question of feeding children at schools, there has also never been a discussion about how it can also be a vehicle to empower the wider community in terms of economic development.

Research overseas shows that the strongest and most sustainable programmes are the ones that are rooted in the local community where the supply of produce comes from local growers and farmers. This provides benefits to the local community through employment in the growing or supply of produce, in the making and service of meals to children in schools . Already, as²⁵ part of the Budget 2020, the Government stated that expanding their Free and Health School Lunch Programme will create 2000 new iobs.26

Children then get to eat food at school that is grown and sourced with dignity locally and made with the dignity of paid labour. The act of providing food to schools becomes an empowering act, for the children and their community.

The safety net of food in schools also extends to the wider community by using the local school as a hub where any extra food made for the school lunches could be frozen and become part of a school pantry. For World Food Day 2018, Eat Right Be Bright ran two school lunch services at two schools in Auckland. Not only did the Principals see the lunch as a joyful experience for all children, the 'cherry on the top' for them was that extra meals that hadn't been consumed could be distributed discreetly to whanau in their school community.

Last year, Feed the Need trialled food pantries in

package", Thomas March, Stuff, 14 May 2020

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26 "Budget 2020: Free school lunches to feed 200,000 kids as part of \$1bn new support

schools in Auckland. The pantries offer Whanau Packs of ingredients for a simple meal, coupons for bread and milk and After School Packs for children. Initial reports have been positive. All have observed that nothing gets wasted. One school found that it brought parents into school, sometimes for the first time either to help run the pantry itself or to use it, leading to an increased engagement between parents and school and building relationships. School pantries can therefore play a significant part as a food safety net for families in financial stress.

A school food programme can enable an increase in a community's control over the food they eat.

Food in school programmes can also increase food sovereignty (the degree of control we have over the food supply and the food we eat), which is inevitably interlinked with our sense of food security (our reliable access to safe and nutritious food). A school food programme²⁷ can enable an increase in a community's control over the food they eat by it being sourced and grown locally and by having access to the produce and food created. In the school food programme operated by the City of Rome, for example, they have city allotments which provide the produce for the school food. In Japan, the food served at school is often grown in school gardens. By including aspects such as these in a school food programme, we can empower the community to have greater control over their food environment and the food they can access.

Central resources are vital

It was clear from early feedback to the Government's Free and Healthy School Food programme that, whilst schools welcomed it in theory, Principals and teachers did not want to run it. They are teachers not caterers. If a food in schools programme is to be done right, it cannot be lumped on teachers on top of their already heavy workload.

Again, overseas school food programmes are organised and run on a day to day basis by centrally funded government or non-governmental organisations who do the procuring, sourcing, making and service of school meals. Not only does this aid accountability and oversight, research by the global community has stipulated that "care should be taken to avoid using teachers or education staff to prepare food, since this merely taxes the system that school feeding programmes aim to enhance." This is basic common sense, school food²⁸ programme 101.

Likewise, as pointed out above in relation to the overreliance on volunteers in the current model of school food organisations in New Zealand and its inherent unsustainability, the prevailing expectations that already stretched communities can do it all (sourcing, funding, organising, preparing, making, service, rolling out) are unrealistic.

Community engagement:

However, it is also clear that dialogue with communities should be at the heart of any national school food programme.

Best practices identified in overseas programmes always include some form of input and ownership from the community. These take different forms. Some are more institutional²⁹ arrangements. For example in some countries, there are community oversight committees of³⁰ school food programmes. In Burlington, Vermont (USA), for instance, a wide range of stakeholders take part: the students are involved in taste tests before any new dish makes it onto the menu and there is a publicprivate partnership between city, schools, farmers, food businesses and community. In Japan and Italy, regular meetings with parents are held for³¹ feedback. In others,

28 "State of School Feeding Worldwide 2013", World Food Programme. pXII

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like the United Kingdom, it's more relaxed and to do with parent choice where they choose their children's lunches

In Aotearoa, feedback we have had from community networks includes that a 'one-size fits all' approach is not desired. They want to see children and whanau consulted on the school food³² programme in their communities, for it to be child friendly and culturally appropriate. This ensures that a programme is developed and rolled out that is responsive to the needs of its particular school community without overburdening them.

We made a commitment to a Zero Hunger world, now is the time to make it happen for children in Aotearoa.

There has been an increasing need for a national, centrally resourced school food programme for some time. In the wake of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, that need has become a matter of urgency. Irrespective of whether it has been a commitment for some time, a Zero Hunger Generation in Aotearoa is no longer the luxury it may have

We have started the process. Now we need to get it done the right way with a national school food programme which is underpinned by ethics and child rights, where advancing dignity, empowerment and wellbeing for our tamariki is firmly at its heart. This establishes a vital safety net and social protection for children that is currently missing and increasingly desperately needed, whilst bringing greater security to the wider community.

In the last few weeks we have accepted that unity, kindness and aroha is required to protect our most vulnerable loved ones and our country.

"Nāu te rourou, nāku te rourou, ka ora ai te iwi - With your food basket and my food basket, the people will thrive".

With more sustainable, structural mechanisms in place, together we can build a Zero Hunger Generation in Aotearoa.

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^{27 &}quot;He kai keo aku ringa: Food Security, sovereignty and systems in Aotearoa", Toi Tangata 2018 webinair at www.toitangata.co.nz by Dr G Kira, Massey University

^{29 &}quot;The GSF Sourcebook" n51

³⁰ Again, see "The GSF Sourcebook", p.52 and examples from Brazil, Ecuador, Ghana

^{31 &}quot;Going Local: Burlington Vermont's Farm to School Program" by D.Davis&D.Hudson at p.162 "School Food Politics: The Complex ecology of Hunger and feeding schools around the World" ed Robert&Weaver-Hightower (Global Studies in Education v.6), 2011

³² Authors' discussion with member community organisations of Tick4kids, Novembe

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- 5 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 24 and 28.
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- 30 Again, see "The GSF Sourcebook", p.52 and examples from Brazil, Ecuador, Ghana amongst others.
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- 32 Authors' discussion with member community organisations of Tick4kids, November 2018.

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"'Nāu te rourou, nāku te rourou, ka ora ai te lwi - With your food basket and my food basket, the people will thrive'. With more sustainable, structural mechanisms in place, together we can build a Zero Hunger Generation in Actearoa."

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