



How to talk about rebalancing our food ecosystem to make it work for everyone:

A narrative briefing paper

Prepared by The Workshop

July 2023

www.theworkshop.org.nz



This content is published by The Workshop under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike licence.

Contents

About this paper	4
Helping people see the benefits of a balanced food ecosystem	5
Mindsets that get in the way of deeper understanding	5
The opportunity — shift people to see and understand the benefits of a unified and balanced food system	6
In a nutshell	7
Section 1. What do experts and advocates believe people need to understand about food (and what change is required)?	16
Section 2. Unhelpful and helpful mindsets, narratives, and frames about food	18
Understanding the cultural landscape — why detail the unhelpful and helpful mindsets?	18
The unhelpful mindsets, narratives and frames about food	19
Embracing the helpful narratives about food systems and amplifying the mindsets that build support for change	25
Section 3. Putting it together: making your stories easy to hear and to share	44
Making stories easy to hear and share: using a vision and values-led story structure	44
Who should tell these stories?.....	46
References	48

The [Public Health Advisory Committee \(PHAC\)](#) is an independent expert advisory committee established under section 93 of the Pae Ora (Healthy Futures) Act 2022. The PHAC was created as part of New Zealand's health system reforms in 2022. The PHAC provides public-facing and evidence-based public health advice to Ministers, the Public Health Agency, Te Whatu Ora (Health New Zealand) and Te Aka Whai Ora (Māori Health Authority).

The PHAC is expected to engage with communities and across the health sector to tackle existing and future public health priorities and risks. It has a focus on innovative and practical solutions, finding new ways of doing things to address the persistent inequities in health outcomes in Aotearoa. Its advice will reflect the perspectives of Māori and the wider New Zealand community and consider the determinants of health.

[The Workshop](#) is a not-for-profit narrative research and strategy organisation based in Aotearoa New Zealand. At The Workshop, we undertake research into public mindsets and narratives about complex economic, environmental, and social issues. Public mindset shift is key to building support for initiatives that will make the biggest difference to repairing, building, and maintaining connected, caring, inclusive communities and thriving ecosystems.

Our methods involve identifying and testing narratives that deepen public thinking and shift shared mindsets on complex issues. We provide evidence-based narrative and framing support to people researching, advocating for, and implementing better systems. With the support of our funders, we make our research publicly available.

About this paper

This paper contains recommendations on how to talk about food and food systems for the purposes of deepening people's understanding about:

- what a food system is
- how it determines people's health and wellbeing
- the problems food systems create and why
- solutions to a food system that is out of balance and not meeting people's needs.

The Public Health Advisory Committee commissioned this piece of work to inform its work on food environments. This paper, and the advice in it, is for anyone advocating for a more just and balanced food system.

The advice in this paper is based on research we located in a brief literature review of international framing research, existing narrative research by The Workshop, and our own expertise. It was prepared by Dr Jess Berentson-Shaw, Ellen Ozarka, and Julie Fairfield in 2023.

We would like to acknowledge in particular the work of the FrameWorks Institute on understanding the framing of food and food systems. It has done extensive research on this issue.

Suggested citation: Berentson-Shaw J., Ozarka, E., & Fairfield, J. (2023). *How to talk about rebalancing our food ecosystem to make it work for everyone: A narrative briefing paper*. The Workshop.

Helping people see the benefits of a balanced food ecosystem

All people have a relationship with food. Most people feel deeply its importance to our wellbeing, to our sense of community and connection, and understand it contributes to health (although this understanding could be broadened and deepened). Most people feel and know through experience that something is not working with food in Aotearoa.

While people feel and know this, at the moment, they have very few mental frameworks or narratives available to them to help them understand, as advocates and experts do, just what has gone wrong and how to fix it.

Our opportunity is to provide more helpful ways of talking and thinking about food so that people not only understand something is wrong with the system but also know that we can collectively make changes to rebalance our food system.

We can draw on what we know about how people feel and relate to food to build understanding and support for changes. We can amplify how a unified, balanced food system can connect and nurture us all. Across a range of communities, people who grow, produce, and eat food have a strong sense of responsibility to provide good food for themselves, their children, or the people they are providing for.

Mindsets that get in the way of deeper understanding

“The consumer and modernism frames gobble up the issue of food.” (FrameWorks Institute, 2006, p. 3)

There are many shared ways of thinking (mindsets) that are getting in the way of deeper understanding of the problems and solutions to our food system. Internationally, researchers have found two that dominate. There are indications both are present in Aotearoa (though further research is required).

The first is consumerism thinking — the belief that food exists wholly within a narrow frame of “the market”. Food is seen as a commodity product that is bought and sold. All the problems and solutions are found within people’s roles as consumers — for example, when people think the problem or solution is people behaving differently as consumers, the market providing more choice for consumers, or the

Shared cultural mindsets

Shared mindsets are cultural ways of reasoning about and understanding how and why issues come about and what should be done about them. They shape people’s responses to information and the policies and practices they are willing to support.



market being forced into being more efficient. If food is not working for some groups, this mental framework suggests it is most likely because they are making the wrong choices for themselves.

The second shared way of thinking that gets in the way of deeper understanding is modernism — the belief that fast and processed food is modern, reliable and predictable, convenient, and hygienic and more productive. When modernism is cued, people can default to thinking that what we have now is simply the best or makes the most sense while unprocessed foods are rationalised as unreliable, inefficient, dirty, or ugly, and organic or regenerative approaches are too old fashioned or a “luxury” based on elitist ideas.

The opportunity — shift people to see and understand the benefits of a unified and balanced food system

There are three big ideas that can help create a food system that works for all people and our planet.

- **We can help people see food as more than the cause of individual problems in different parts of the system — for example, obesity as a problem for food-related health.**
- **We can talk about how a balanced and unified food system is better for all of us — how we all thrive when everyone gets the food that they need in the way that they need it.**
- **We can reassure people that we have what it takes to create the changes we need. We have the strengths and drive to redesign our food system, drawing on deep knowledge of what works better for people and the environment.**

Advocates and experts can intentionally and strategically amplify these helpful ways of thinking and talking, diverting people away from consumerism and modernism mindsets. We can make a food system that works to get good food that is good for the land and to all people in ways that nurture not just individuals but our communities and local places.

The advice in this paper is based on primarily international research into framing food and food systems — local specific research is needed. However, that should not prevent us from using what we do know to reframe our conversations about food.

In Aotearoa New Zealand particularly, there is a significant opportunity to learn from those already leading in this work to collaborate across the different parts of the system and build and test a unique narrative for our local needs.

In a nutshell...

To deepen the public's understanding of complex issues and build support for policies, practices, and structures that work to improve public outcomes, we can use the science of narrative and mindset shift.

We can amplify certain narratives (patterns of meaning in our communication) using specific frames, values, metaphors, simple explanations and stories, experts, advocates, and communicators. This amplification of helpful narratives can divert people away from unhelpful shared mindsets (ways of rationalising) about the issue while pointing them towards more helpful ones.

Such a narrative shift strategy helps create an information environment in which people are able to understand and think about food systems in accurate and rational ways.

Amplify these big ideas across your stories and messages — the helpful narratives

✓ A unified food system

- » This systems narrative fills the ‘cognitive hole’ in public understanding of food as a system.

✓ A balanced food ecosystem nurtures us all

- » This ‘together we thrive’ narrative works to show how the unbalanced food ecosystem affects all of us and how a balanced food ecosystem nurtures us all.

✓ People who are hungry are capable and solve problems

- » This strengths-based narrative highlights the strength and agency of affected people working to rebalance the food ecosystem.

Avoid these big ideas — the unhelpful narratives

- ✗ Talking about our relationship with food as based on individual choice and behaviour, making the food system hard to see — individualism narrative.
- ✗ Framing individual choice and action through what people choose to buy or not buy, making it hard to see non-market-based solutions — consumerism narrative.
- ✗ Talking about people experiencing harm as “others” because of something fundamentally different in them, making it hard to see shared goals and benefits from better food systems — otherism narratives.
- ✗ Showing fast and processed food is modern, reliable and predictable, convenient, and hygienic, undercutting indigenous and regenerative systems of food that improve our relationship with food — modernism narrative.
- ✗ Framing problems in the food systems as too big and complex to solve, sapping people’s hope and agency — fatalism narrative.

Shared narratives

Narratives are a pattern of meaning present in our communications — like a golden thread weaving through them. The pattern of meaning often reflects shared deep mindsets. Narratives often have core values — our core human motivations — nested within them.



Stories

Stories are different tales about particular events and people that appear in different forms across our information environment. At the heart of many stories are shared narratives. Many stories together contribute to building and amplifying specific narratives.



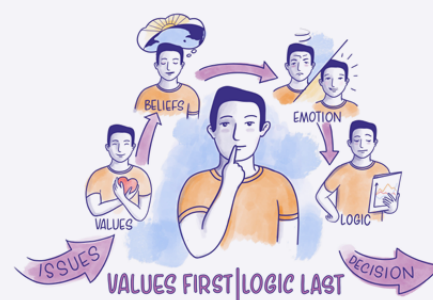
How to amplify a unified food system

Use these values frames, simple explanations (metaphors and explanatory chains), and words that help build understanding

- ✓ Lead with a vision of a transformed food system that embodies concepts of **wellness, connection to environment, protection, and care for the land** and elevates **mātauranga Māori** and shared learning.
- ✓ Lead with the values of **legacy, stewardship, and responsible management**
— for example, “Most of us who produce food want to leave a legacy of a land that thrives, that can support the next generation’s health.”
- ✓ Use equity values — **righting injustice so all of us get what we need**
— for example, “All children deserve to be treated fairly and have the same chances to thrive and be healthy, no matter where they live.”
- ✓ Explain the food system as a whole using **‘the runaway food system’** and **‘foundations of life’** explanatory metaphors
— for example, “Experts are increasingly concerned about what they call our Runaway Food System. The way we produce food today has radically changed, and now has the power to alter the foundations of life as we know it.” (FrameWorks, 2006, p. 12)
- ✓ Use **‘building blocks’** and **‘foundations of health’** to explain food as a social determinant of wellbeing
— for example, “To create a society where everybody can thrive, we need all of the right building blocks in place: stable jobs, good pay, quality housing, and good food. But right now, in too many of our communities, blocks are missing or damaged. It’s time to fix the gaps.”
- ✓ Use **‘the food system is like an ecosystem’** metaphor to explain economic factors that shape hunger
— for example, “Our food system is like an ecosystem. It’s made of many parts, including the government, which regulates food, people who grow and produce food, the

Values

Values are our deepest human motivations — our ‘why’ of life. Values are distinct from attributed value (a term often used in relation to people’s preference). We all hold a broad range of values. At a subconscious level, values act as a filter for the information that we receive. They provide a frame to ask how do I interpret this information in the context of what I am deeply motivated by (values)?



food industry, and people who buy and sell food. These parts need to work together for the whole system to function properly and stay in balance.”

- ✓ Explain physical food environments using ‘**a system of imbalanced rivers**’ metaphor — for example, “In too many towns around our country, there’s barely a trickle of healthy options, making it much harder to put healthy food on the table.” (Jennings & Hyatt, 2022, p. 5)
- ✓ Explain food marketing to children using a ‘**marketing and advertising stage**’ metaphor — for example, “Unhealthy food options are in the spotlight.” (L’Hôte et al., 2021, p. 12)

Avoid these framing strategies

- ✗ A focus on individual behaviours, education, or the role of parental decision making without naming the way the food system works and the role that government and commercial actors have to play.
- ✗ Pointing to problems such as high food prices in New Zealand without explaining the system factors driving high food prices.
- ✗ Using data and facts about people and their choices rather than the environments, places, and systems that affect those choices
- ✗ Singling out groups of people as different, especially fat people. Avoid framing obesity and obese people, which raises particularly powerful consumerism and individualism narratives.
- ✗ Using profit, income, or the economy as the reason why we need changes to the food system.

Avoid these words

- ✗ The terms “healthy choices”, “lifestyles”, and “behaviour” cue unhelpful individualism mindsets — instead, talk about options and opportunities that are not being made available to people.
- ✗ Terms like “wicked problems”, which make problems seem large and insurmountable and solutions seem inadequate compared to the problem.
- ✗ The term “equity” is not well understood — replace it with “everyone getting what they need”.
- ✗ Referring to people only in their role as consumers — for example, “consumers, customers, business owners, and producers”.

How to amplify “a balanced food ecosystem nurtures us all”

Use these values frames, simple explanations and words that help build understanding

- ✓ Create an inclusive, concrete vision of a balanced food system that nurtures people in the different ways that matter — as people who eat, grow, produce, or work with food.
- ✓ Use solidarity values that emphasise the role of working for each other on collective solutions across communities and differences.
- ✓ Frame protection of the places and people we love as a core value.
- ✓ Explain the harms of the runaway food system — for example, “For many of us, there are natural places that we love and that we know sustain us. The runaway food system is doing irreversible harm to these rivers, lakes, forests.”
- ✓ Consider the use of an **unbalanced/rebalanced/imbalanced rivers** metaphor — for example, “Right now, our food system is out of balance. In our local neighbourhoods and in schools, there is only a trickle of nutritious affordable food for our children while people in the food industry are benefiting from delivering them a flood of nutritionally empty food.”
- ✓ Try the **infrastructure of care and connection metaphor** — for example, “Across different communities, we use food to nurture our connections and relationships with each other.”
- ✓ Use explanatory chains to highlight policies that work for people experiencing significant hunger as well as those struggling near the margins (big tent policies).
- ✓ Use explanatory chains to **broaden understanding of the term “hunger”** to include a lack of healthy food and the long-term consequences of chronic lack of food and nutritious food.

Avoid these frames and words

- ✗ “Sustainability” — if used without context, it can raise individualistic thinking like reducing personal consumption by those that are greedy or wasteful.
- ✗ Pointing to exceptional or hero individuals in the food system without referring to the systemic and structural issues.
- ✗ Focusing on behaviours or lifestyles of people who are harmed by the food system, including fat people in relation to obesity interventions.

How to amplify “people who are hungry are capable and solve problems”

Use these values frames, simple explanations and words that help build understanding

- ✓ Use this strengths-based narrative with a systems narrative so that it avoids cueing individualism thinking.
- ✓ **Draw on solidarity values** — our care for people through the mindset of intertwined futures — for example, “Across different communities, parents want to ensure their kids have access to good nutritious food that works for them and their families. However, people in the food industry are exploiting children’s health. Parents and caregivers are excluded from the conversation. We can work together and demand children are no longer exploited.”
- ✓ Use **self-direction, curiosity, creativity, and problem-solving values**. For example, “People in our farming communities are curious and creative people, with a sense of responsibility to the land. Working with others, we have the ability to move away from land use that harms the land and water and to creatively tackle the challenges that face our communities today and in the future.”
- ✓ Explain the collective solutions and how they have worked in local settings.
- ✓ Use explanatory chains to broaden understanding of the term “hunger” to include a lack of healthy food and the long-term consequences of chronic lack of food and nutritious food.

Avoid these frames and words

- ✗ “Food diversity” — instead, explain the harms of the runaway food system.
- ✗ The term “food insecurity” is not well understood — instead, try broadening the meaning and use of the term “hunger”.
- ✗ People often do not understand how the terms “social justice”, “human rights”, and “fairness” are relevant to food systems. Instead, try using prosocial values with explanations of food systems.

Make your stories easy to hear and share — use a vision and values-led story structure

Build a compelling story that is easy for people open to understanding to hear and share by using a vision and values-led structure as scaffolding. Follow up your vision and values with a clear explanation — one that names barriers, agents of action, and solutions.

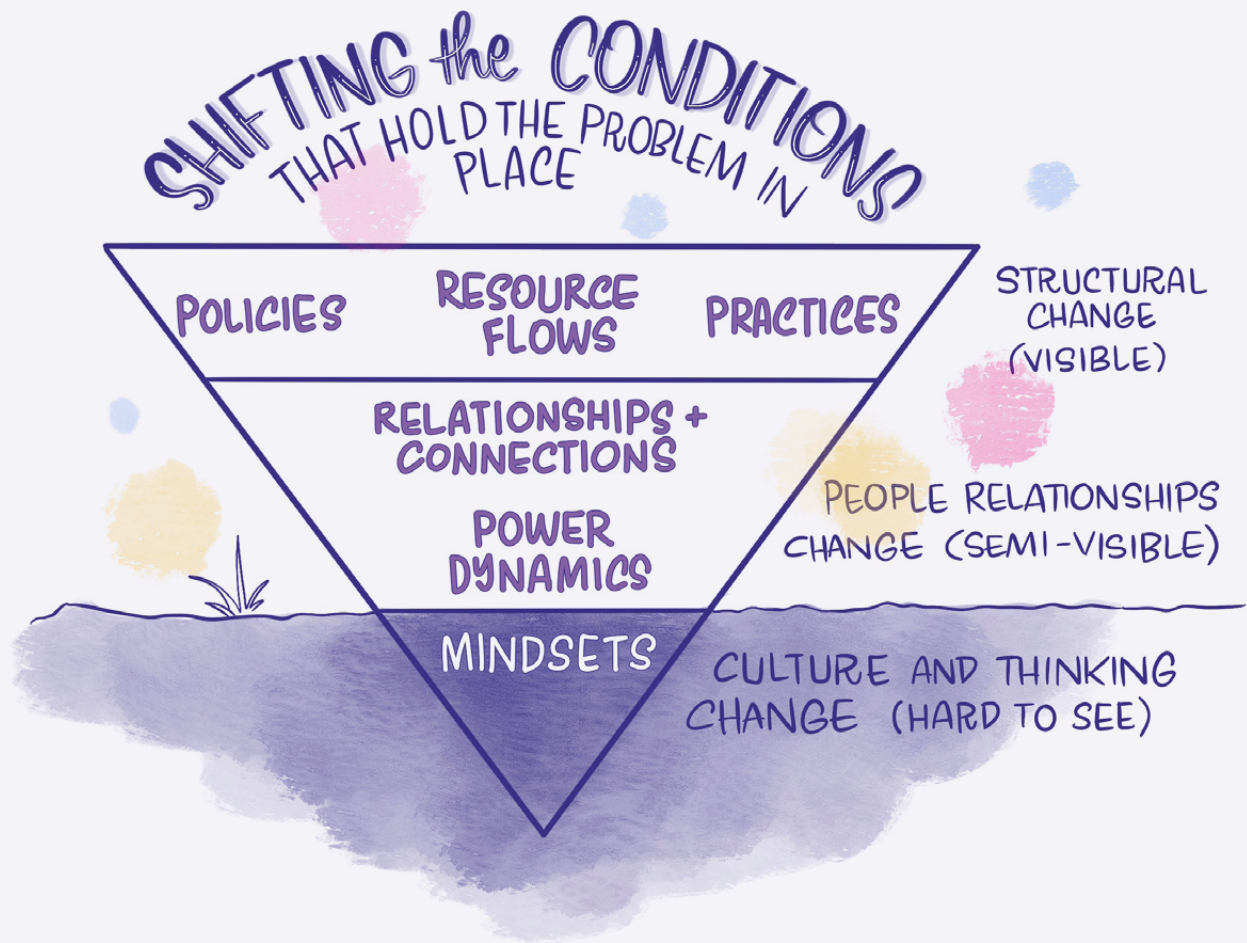
1. Vision and values — invite people into the issue through the prosocial things that matter to them.
2. Barrier — name what is getting in the way of prioritising the values or vision and who is responsible.
3. Simple explanation — explain the problem using tested simplifying models.
4. Specific solutions — provide clear solutions and include an action for people to take.

Stories

Stories are different tales about particular events and people that appear in different forms across our information environment. At the heart of many stories are shared narratives. Many stories together contribute to building and amplifying specific narratives.



Framing matters — how mindsets and narratives shape systems and unlock change



Systems change practitioners have identified three factors that shape our systems:

- Visible factors — policy, practice, and resource flows.
- Semi-visible factors — power dynamics and relationships.
- Invisible factors — cultural mindsets and shared assumptions, mental models, or schema.

Social scientists have found that shared mindsets and the narratives that carry them are a powerful force in shaping people's understanding of big issues and their support (or otherwise) for specific policies, practices, and approaches.

When we learn how food is being framed and what effect it is having on people who make the decisions, we can take control of our own framing and build more powerful movements for a more balanced food system — one that enables everyone to access and enjoy food that meets their social, cultural, and physical needs.

Read more about shifting mindsets and narratives to unlock change: [How mindset and narrative shift can enable change: a briefing paper](#)

Decision makers and the public

Narrative shift work is based on research showing that change happens in part when decision makers believe there is a significant group of the public that supports the actions being advocated for. Narrative and mindset shift work is designed to be used by groups of people and organisations to work together to shift shared public mindsets and activate people to show decision makers they support the initiatives or changes — making decision makers more likely to act.

Section 1. What do experts and advocates believe people need to understand about food (and what change is required)?

Harms from the food system to people and the environment have been documented consistently both internationally and in Aotearoa New Zealand. In our scene-setting conversations, the following core principles, concepts, and understandings were identified as important for the public to see and understand:

- Food is core to human wellbeing. It is a human right.
- Food is fundamental to people's connection to and care for each other and the environment. This is shared and expressed across different cultures.
- Food transcends being simply a consumer product or commodity product.
- When food and food systems are not working well for people, it harms more than just physical health. Food-related harms are not simply about obesity and obesity-related illnesses.
- For Māori, food growing, gathering, preparing, eating, and sharing encompasses fundamental relationships with te taiao, tino rangatiratanga, concepts of sovereignty, handing down of mātauranga, and strengthening whakapapa connections.
- Food is produced in a system of many parts, and it is the structure and functioning of this system that drives people's food-related health and wellbeing over individual choice and behaviour.
- All aspects of the food system need to be considered to overcome food-related harms.
- Access to spaces to grow and collect food for all people (a public/common good) is fundamental to a functioning food system and people's health and wellbeing.
- Communities want to have a say in their food environment to decide what's around them — for example, the use of green spaces, food outlets, supermarkets etc.

- A number of effective policy, practice, and regulatory interventions to improve food-related health have been identified — for example, preventing food advertising to children, the use of directed taxes on specific foods, food industry regulation, placement and type of food outlets etc.
- The production and expectation of out-of-season food has significant impacts on cost and availability. A refocus on seasonality and local production is an important part of improving access and reducing costs.
- People who grow food at a larger scale reflect a diverse group of people and interests. Many people who farm and grow food want to do so responsibly and make a contribution to the health of people and the environment.
- Consumer preference and “freedom to choose” is a frequently utilised argument that acts as a block to effective interventions in the food system.

This briefing paper seeks to answer these questions:

- What narratives and mindsets about food and food systems get in the way of people understanding these issues and support for change?
- What narratives, frames, and stories can unlock understanding and build support for improvements to our food system?

Section 2. Unhelpful and helpful mindsets, narratives, and frames about food

Understanding the cultural landscape — why detail the unhelpful and helpful mindsets?

In our cultural landscape, there are any number of ways of thinking (mindsets) and talking (narratives) about issues. Some are much closer to how experts and advocates think and talk about the issues than others. Many of us are not firmly anchored to one or the other mindset on particular issues but move between different mindsets based on what we hear, who we hear it from, and when and how often we hear it (see sidebar description of narratives and stories). The goal of working to shift mindsets and narratives is to divert people away from the unhelpful mindsets that are present in our culture and redirect them towards the helpful mindsets that are present and, in the process, deepen public understanding.

We detail unhelpful mindsets and narratives so we can see the landscape of thinking and communication in front of us. It helps us identify the places we don't want people to head towards. We detail the helpful mindsets and narratives to give advocates, experts, and communicators a line of sight to the place to navigate people towards.

It's important to understand that the job of deepening understanding is not to point out unhelpful narratives — as that simply draws people's attention to them and gives them more airtime in our culture — but rather to work out how to avoid them in our own communication and direct people, who are most open to understanding (see sidebar on your audience) to the more helpful narratives and mindsets.

Audiences

To shift mindsets, focus on two main groups of people — those who already understand your issue and those open to understanding it (who are also open to being persuaded by unhelpful narratives and ideas). Avoid trying to persuade or argue with those who are entrenched in their opposition to the issue — doing so simply amplifies unhelpful narratives. Instead, provide people open to understanding with the helpful counter narratives they need more exposure to and work with those already on board to do so.



The unhelpful mindsets, narratives and frames about food

The individualism mindset and narratives make the food system hard to see

Individualism features strongly in how people think about food. Individualism is the belief that negative life outcomes are determined by lack of will power, lack of sufficient drive, bad choices, or, in some cases, moral failing and insufficiency. Individualism is also the belief that, with enough effort or hard work, anyone will do well. If we eat poor food, that is a result of individual choice, if we experience good health, that is because we worked hard for it (FrameWorks Institute, 2006). In the case of child health, parents' effort and choices are believed to be the source (L'Hôte et al., 2021).

When individualism narratives are used, it makes it hard to see the food system as a system — hiding the way the food system operates to influence people's access to nutritious and health-affirming food. Individualism creates a stigma about those who do not buy and eat nutritious food and people who are fat or overweight as well as conflating food with fatness. Individualism dehumanises and drives a belief in moral, intellectual, or cultural deficiencies of individuals or even specific groups of people who cannot access good food. Due to the judgements of insufficiency and the dehumanising elements of individualism, it has strong associations with racist mindsets and narratives (Miller et al., 2021) — for example, specific cultural groups choosing to live unhealthy lifestyles.

Stories that frame people's personal responsibility for eating healthy food, a need for lifestyle improvements, or need for greater education and effort draw on individualism mindsets and narratives. Using terms like “choice”, “choose”, “responsibility”, “will power”, “working hard”, and “discipline” all cue individualistic thinking.

When asked to think of solutions, people drawing on an individualism mindset identify individual-level solutions – for example, home gardening, chicken rearing (FrameWorks Institute, 2006), nutrition education, cooking lessons, and exercise classes (L'Hôte et al., 2021). Individual solutions are all things that people can do in their own home and lifestyle.

A particular variant of this mindset — farming individualism — leads people to blame individual farmers for harm to our environmental and food systems. It prompts thinking about “hero farmers” and “bad farmers” as opposed to, say, industry or policy influences (The Workshop, 2021).

How experts and advocates inadvertently cue the individualism mindset

It's often clear when people and organisations opposed to effective change in the food system are using individualism narratives. However, advocates can inadvertently cue these mindsets in our communications:

- Talking about “healthy choices”, “lifestyles”, and “behaviour” — instead, talk about providing more “options” and “opportunities” or talk about the options and opportunities that are not made available to people, shifting to a systems narrative.

- Focusing on education campaigns without structural shifts that imply that people will make better choices if they have the correct facts to hand.
- Highlighting the role of parents in childhood health and nutrition — making it hard to see the role that government and commercial actors have to play (L’Hôte et al., 2021).

Case study: Cueing individualism



In the article [Cutting GST on fresh produce won’t help those most in need](#) from Aotearoa, the author frames a lack of discipline, will power, and low trust in people on low incomes to spend GST savings on healthier food.

The consumerism variant of individualism makes it hard to see non-market-based solutions

“There’s something wrong with our system and with our way of thinking if, as a nation, we produce food for 50 million people, but can’t even feed five million people, because it goes off to export.” — [Dr Jessica Hutchings](#) (Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Huirapa, Gujarati)

Like individualism, consumerism reflects the belief that individual choice and action is the cause and solution of complex society-wide issues. However, the consumerism variant frames individual choice and action through people’s roles as consumers — what they choose to buy or not buy. Consumerism contains the belief that the food system comprises “the market”. Food is seen as a commodity product that is bought and sold. FrameWorks Institute (2006) found that consumerism was a dominant narrative used to frame the food system and the mindset used to understand it.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, consumerism means people tend to understand food largely through the lens of it being our primary export industry (Cameron, 2023) and as such a source of national (and personal) income.

Consumerism makes it harder to see some of the ‘harms’ of the food system and reframes them as ‘features’. For example, the ability to buy and eat foods outside of a region or season harms affordability and the environment but it is seen primarily as a benefit to the consumer (FrameWorks Institute, 2006).

Consumerism positions affordability rather than nutritional benefit (or other factors) as the primary mark of good food. Therefore, fast food and processed food (which comes with other harms) is reasoned as being more practical while suggestions that people eat more whole foods, local foods, or organics risk being viewed as elitist and out of touch with the needs of ordinary people (FrameWorks Institute, 2006).

Because consumerism makes it hard to see and understand many aspects of the food system, the solutions that it brings to mind focus on individuals purchasing differently to either spend less on food or to influence what the market provides — for example, growing your own food, buying budget brand food, shopping at farmers’ markets, or choosing healthier options at their local supermarkets. It also raises technical changes to the market settings such as increased competition.

Solutions that focus on democratising food, increasing sovereignty, community control, or local production for example are obscured when consumerism is engaged (Aubrun et al., 2005b; Cameron, 2023; FrameWorks Institute, 2006).

Food producers, especially growers and farmers, are seen as being motivated primarily by financial return. Solutions or interventions are proposed primarily through the provision of increased financial returns or offsets of financial loss (The Workshop, 2021).

How experts and advocates inadvertently cue the consumerism mindset

- Highlighting that nutritious foods taste better — this leads people to think that taste is a luxury purchased by those with the means to afford it (FrameWorks Institute, 2006).
- Using profit, income, or the economy as the primary reason we need changes to the food system.
- Economic metaphors inadvertently surface a consumerist mindset. Agreeing that feeding children healthy food increases productivity and offers a good “return on investment” against future health system costs rather than because it’s the right thing to do to keep tamariki well.
- Referring to people in their role as consumers and market-based agents – “consumers, customers, business owners, and producers”.

Case study: Cueing consumerism mindsets about food



In this article from Time magazine on a [pasta boycott in Italy](#), you can see how consumerism mindsets dominate thinking about food problems, including from advocates. People see solutions in terms of their role as consumers (boycott the pasta) while wider solutions that are suggested focus primarily on intervening in food in terms of its role as a commodity product in a market place.

Otherism makes it hard to see shared goals and benefits from better food systems

Otherism is the belief that there are people who are fundamentally different and “other” from “us”. If these others are experiencing harm, otherism has us believe that is because of something fundamentally different in them (as opposed to common factors in systems). These others are seen as a threat to our way of life. If others are seen to benefit from particular changes, it is believed to be at the expense of our needs. We call this ‘zero sum’ thinking.

Otherism in particular makes it hard to see the common harms and benefits from unbalanced food systems and how those systems work to cause harm.

In terms of food and health, otherness features significantly in conversations about food, fatness, and fitness. In the UK for example, stigmatising zero sum thinking is associated with attributing blame for obesity onto parents and individuals: “they are costing the rest of us by taking up NHS resources” (Jennings & Hyatt, 2022, p. 3).

In conversations about farming and food growers, farming communities can feel othered and demonised for Aotearoa’s environmental problems while the systemic and structural pressures farmers are under that lead to environmental harms are not seen (The Workshop, 2021).

In terms of solutions, otherism directs people to solutions that focus on individual effort, will power and strength, or exceptional or hero actors instead of systems and structural changes. It discourages thinking about solutions in which cooperation and mutual interests and goals are seen.

How experts and advocates inadvertently cue the otherism mindset

- Pointing to exceptional or hero individuals in the food system as enacting change without referring to systemic and structural issues.
- Framing bad-faith actors as dispositionally bad as opposed to a product of the system incentives and structures.
- A focus on the behaviours or lifestyles of people who are harmed by the food system — for example, fat people in relation to obesity interventions and conversations.

Modernism undercuts indigenous and regenerative systems that improve our relationship with food

Modernism is the belief that fast and processed food is modern, reliable and predictable, convenient, and hygienic while unprocessed foods are unreliable, dirty, or ugly (FrameWorks Institute, 2006). Likewise in modernism, “whole, organic, fresh foods as regrettably lost artifacts of a bygone era” (FrameWorks Institute, 2006, p. 4) as are farmers. Particularly, small or family-owned farms are seen as quaint, old-fashioned, and stuck in the past where they are entirely disconnected from our modern food problems and solutions (Aubrun & Grady, 2003).

Modernism thinking brings to mind causes of problems as primarily issues with yields, profitability, or threats to the business model from the outside while making it harder to see the wider social, health, and wellbeing problems.

In terms of solutions, modernism brings to mind primarily technological solutions for better food or correcting problems in the food system rather than seeing solutions in less extractive, less commercialised and commodified food and food production systems.

Case study: Modernism in action



In [this example](#), the frame or lens through which food problems are viewed by people across the political spectrum is entirely economical in nature. Genetic modification is (both those for and against) a solution for profitability and earning. Entirely hidden in this discussion of inefficiencies and profitability are some of the most challenging food systems issues — accessibility and nutrition. This example also obscures the people who eat food in New Zealand.

Fatalism makes solutions seem impossible and saps people’s agency

Fatalism is the belief that the food systems problems are too big and complex to solve. The problems or systems are too embedded, and the people responsible (often people in government) are not up to the job. In the context of food, this also includes people who run food-related businesses. There is a strong element of inevitability or even naturalism (it is the only/best way) in fatalism mindsets.

It makes it hard to see the way in which many of our systems have been designed and implemented by people and can be redesigned. It saps people’s sense of hope, agency, and optimism, leading to disengagement.

Environmental harm from the production of food is thought of as regrettable but inevitable — it’s just the cost we pay for food. L’Hôte et al. (2021) found fatalistic beliefs included thinking of childhood obesity as a part of modern life and children having a natural preference for high-sugar, high-fat, processed foods.

Fatalism surfaces over the more simplistic explanations for the problems that are often based on the belief that bad individuals control the system and cannot be influenced — for example, corrupt politicians or greedy farmers. This in turn makes it hard to see the agency and ability that people do have to intervene in systems.

How experts and advocates inadvertently cue the fatalism mindset

- Villianising those with the power to make the change. This makes it seem like change is not possible because the people who can do something about it are corrupt and cannot be trusted to act in everyone’s best interest.
- Pointing to problems such as high food prices in New Zealand without explaining the system factors driving high food prices.
- Fact-heavy communications that lead people to feel overwhelmed and give up, preferring to make good choices on instinct (FrameWorks Institute, 2006).
- Scaremongering or making problems seem large – for example, using terms like “wicked problems”. This makes solutions seem inadequate compared to the problem and leads people to think the only area they can influence things is at an individual scale (FrameWorks Institute, 2006).
- Providing facts about people and their choices rather than the environments, places, and systems that affect those choices (L’Hôte et al., 2021).

Embracing the helpful narratives about food systems and amplifying the mindsets that build support for change

The research from the US highlights that the main job of more helpful narratives and communications about food and food systems is to make the food system visible to people and convince them that the system needs change and can be changed.

In plain terms, think of helpful narratives and mindsets like the big ideas or concepts that you want to embrace and amplify. Often, these big ideas will act as a counterweight to the unhelpful narratives and mindsets. Helpful narratives draw people away from unhelpful mindsets and narratives and build understandings that are not currently there.

There are core cognitive, psychological, and linguistic tools that make these narratives easy to hear and share. Values frames, simple explanations, and clear concrete language can make our communications more compelling.

Of course, knowing what narratives are helpful and the tools that work is one thing – using them in your communications is another. The most practical way to do this is to use a vision and values-led story structure as the scaffolding for these techniques. We describe the vision and values story structure in the final section of this paper.

In the following sections we:

- highlight the big idea/narrative that we think needs amplifying
- explain the various tested values frames, simplifying models, and metaphors that help to make that idea easy to hear and understand.
- Note that most of the evidence we located focuses on how to create a unified food ecosystem narrative. We have also included two other narratives we think will be useful for food systems advocates based on our work in different but related areas like economic justice.

Create a strong unified food ecosystem narrative to fill the ‘cognitive hole’ in public understanding of food as a system

FrameWorks Institute (2006) found in the US that most people have no existing understanding of what a food system is, how it affects their lives, and what can be done about it.

Aubrun et al. (2005b) explain that Americans’ cognitive hole about food systems can be linked to their lived experience. Because increasingly fewer Americans work on farms they have fewer opportunities to experience or even witness food production. The researchers discuss how the “big picture” of food production is obscured by the “little picture” of people’s everyday lives — experiences of shopping, cooking, and eating in restaurants dominate and make it harder to think about food systems as a whole. Further, people don’t know that they don’t know and feel satisfied with their current view of how food works.

Aubrun et al. (2005b) also link the cognitive hole around food systems to the modernism narrative, which Americans use to make sense of how the “modern” world works — incorporating fragmentary information about food systems but not adding up to a fuller picture that could help people understand the importance of the changes advocated by experts (Aubrun et al., 2005b, p. 6).

Given the consumerism and modernism mindsets that dominate and are often used to divert the conversation, it makes sense that people might have a limited conceptualisation of the wider food system (Aubrun et al., 2005a).

In Aotearoa, we arguably are closer to food production so it may be easier to fill the gap that may exist here.

However, one of the problems is that experts and advocates may not consistently talk about the food system as a unifying concept. In the US, it was found that food was talked about in a modular way by advocates. The researchers identified a number of paradigms that food and food issues are addressed through — for example, food security, food and health (usually obesity), food and labour issues, food and sustainability, slow food, and traditional and indigenous food pathways. There were few connections made for people between these concepts, or if they were, the language and frames used were very difficult for people to access. There was heavy use of jargon/technical or in-group terms like social justice, fairness, equity, and human rights, which doesn't mean a lot to people not already in the know.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, we certainly see elements of this phenomenon of talking about food issues in silos or modules. For example, there is a lot of talk about the relationship between supermarkets and consumers and supermarkets and food producers, about farmers and export earnings, about poverty and food, and a lot about obesity and health. There are fewer conversations about the food ecosystem.

When food is talked about only as individual components, researchers find they do not have the strength to divert people away from the strong consumerism and modernisation mindsets, noting, “One of the dangers that faces many of the individual paradigms ... is that they are susceptible to being “co-opted” by powerful advertising lobbies that tend to reduce the issue to a matter of “consumer choice” — a cognitive move that discourages people from seeing the big picture.” (Aubrun et al., 2005a, p. 6).

Researchers suggest a unified model of concept of the food system as a whole alongside the individual paradigms to “strengthen each paradigm while increasing the collective efficacy of advocates’ efforts to bring the Food System into public awareness” (Aubrun et al., 2005a, p. 10) — essentially making experts and advocates jobs easier.

While this is research from the US, it is our sense that there isn't a strong unified model of the food system present in the conversation about food in Aotearoa New Zealand in te ao Pākehā — the worldview that tends to dominate our information environment. It may well be present in te ao Māori. We would recommend that work goes into exploring a unified food systems model unique to Aotearoa developed within a Tiriti partnership.

The good news is that people are eager to know more about food systems once they are engaged with an effective narrative (FrameWorks Institute, 2006).

In general, systems narratives work to counter individualism, consumerism and ‘limiting choice’ arguments by:

- **associating the food system with prosocial values that people already hold**
- **reassigning responsibility for poor outcomes to the system, not the individual — connecting our food context to our health and options available to us (L’Hôte et al., 2021)**
- **conveying new information about how the food system works by providing good explanations over descriptions**
- **linking the fate of the food system to specific consequences — especially for public health**
- **talking about what happens in specific concrete terms when we change the food context and giving**
- **giving local examples of non individual interventions**
- **creating a sense of who is responsible and what they need to do (agency)**
- **avoiding jargon terms like “equity” and “health outcomes” without explaining them, ideally use plain language.**

Making the balanced food system narrative easy to understand, hear, and share

Values frames, simple explanations, and clear concrete language can make our communications more compelling and easy to understand, hear, and share.

Vision

It is important to create a concrete and clear vision of what a balanced food system looks like. This helps make it real for people who have not thought about food as a system and are exposed to mindsets like consumerism or modernism. Opening with a vision in stories and communications is an invitation for people to connect with the issue and creates a pause in our fast-paced information environment. This encourages them to understand more. Visions need to draw a picture literally and metaphorically, on an everyday level, of what a society looks like, what life might feel like, and what people would like more of and less of with a balanced and healthy food system.

In Aotearoa, Cameron (2023) recommends a vision of a transformed food system that embodies concepts of wellness, connection to environment, and protection and care for the land and elevates mātauranga Māori and shared learning.

In a review of locally led reports from 30 organisations in Aotearoa, Cameron (2023) found that most shared a vision of what a better food system might look like:

- **Local** — by locals for locals, strengthening community resilience.
- **Affordable** — everyone can afford it.
- **Connected** — people are connected to each other, their food, and environment via food.
- **Healthy** — healthy food environments lead to healthy people.
- **Regenerative** — nutritious for people, protects and supports te taiao.
- **Resilient** — can withstand and recover swiftly after crises.

Cameron notes, “Māori understanding of kai, and a revitalisation of Māori kai sovereignty is a core part of the vision for local food systems, and presents a different worldview to linear industrial food systems.” (Cameron, 2023, p. 7).

Values

Use legacy and responsible management, and protection values

Legacy and responsible management values reflect people’s motivation to be good ancestors — to leave the world in a better or at least a healthy state for those people who come after. It references long-term thinking and planning, being wise, and taking consideration of the evidence. A legacy value discusses “what children are exposed to, what kind of food system we leave to them, and what happens to the planet under our stewardship” (FrameWorks Institute, 2006, p. 9).

Protection values reflect our motivations to protect those people and things that we love. These motivations are borne out of connection and care, not fear.

FrameWorks Institute’s quantitative testing found that the values of leaving a legacy and protection were significantly effective in priming a sense of collective responsibility, increasing concern about harms and support for effective action on environmental and social harms (FrameWorks Institute, 2006).

Using prosocial values

When people are helped to reflect on their most intrinsic, relational, and prosocial values — for example, helpfulness, responsibility, wisdom, pragmatism, care for the environment, creativity, and self-direction — as part of a conversation about a social or collective problem, they are more likely to support prosocial and pro-environmental policies, practices, and changes. In part, this is because they see how the issue is relevant to their deepest motivations. Research shows that, when our narratives and stories ‘prime’ prosocial values, people become better at rationalising information about prosocial and pro-environmental issues and are more likely to act in support of prosocial and pro-environment policies and practices.



What this sounds like

“We expect our food system to produce what we need now and for generations to come, but it is becoming increasingly clear that decisions are being made in food production that will affect the food system far into the future. Experts say that the pesticides and hormones that are used in growing food, and the distance that food travels, have long-term consequences on the food system’s viability. Some experts are particularly concerned about food that is produced halfway across the country, or across the globe, which weakens farm economies and puts at risk our ability to produce food in years to come because more and more farmers quit farming. Other experts focus more on the pesticides and chemical fertilizers that can have long-term consequences for human health and the environment. Most experts agree that short-term decisions made by food producers in our food system have long-term consequences, and there are changes we can make now that will ensure we have a stable, healthy food system for our children and grandchildren.” (FrameWorks Institute, 2006, p. 11)

“We expect our food system to be dependable and trustworthy, but it is becoming increasingly clear that decisions are being made in food production that affect us all and some experts are beginning to call for changes to protect us. For example, the pesticides and hormones that are used in growing food, and the distance that food travels, have an effect on our health and environment ... Most experts agree that the health and nutrition that people expect from food, and that parents expect for their children, are being undermined by our [runaway] food system, and there are changes we can make.” (FrameWorks Institute, 2006, p. 12)

Insight: Avoiding individualism, extrinsic, and security values in talking about food



It is tempting to use fear or individual-level loss and gain to try and motivate people into understanding and acting on big issues. However, fear-based framing often leads to less-expansive thinking from people. ‘Self-protection’ responses mean they reach for the most simple and straightforward explanations while also looking to blame others. Using individualism values like money, wealth, achievement, and status to motivate people make it hard for people to connect with their prosocial and more intrinsic motivations associated with action on prosocial issues. Such framing can also cue zero sum game thinking — for example, “Yes, but what will I lose from your solutions?”

Hendricks et al. (2018) found that collective economic prosperity was unhelpful to deepening understanding about food and hunger. Rather, it increased unhelpful beliefs such as that hunger is caused by laziness or poor personal decisions and the belief that poor people who receive welfare or government assistance are abusing the system.

Equity values: righting injustice to ensure all of us get what we need

L'Hôte et al., (2021) recommend that we draw on people's belief in righting injustice and all people getting what they need (equity values) to highlight that people and children do not have the same access to good food based on where they live. Equity values have the potential to activate a sense of collective responsibility and collective efficacy. When using equity values, discuss how solutions for particular groups make society fairer for all children to show how we all benefit collectively when society is fairer as a whole.

What this sounds like

"All children deserve to be treated fairly and have the same chances to thrive and be healthy, no matter where they live. Many families do not have access to the things children need to be healthy. We need to ensure that everyone can afford healthy options and opportunities."
(L'Hôte et al., 2021, p. 14)

In the US, relating equity values to place ("all children deserve ... no matter where they live") rather than to race, economic status, or other attributes ("all children deserve ... no matter the income of their parents") circumvented the prejudices that can lead to counter-productive us versus them thinking. Talking about equity across places also helps people to see that local-level solutions can be effective. However, L'Hôte et al. (2021) recommended avoiding naming certain areas, peoples, or groups because it can lead to individualistic blame thinking.

Warning

- ✗ **Avoid:** The term "equity" – it is technical jargon for most people.
- ✓ **Try instead:** "Getting all people what they need to be healthy".

Food, narratives and te ao Māori

In many of the narratives and concepts expressed by experts and advocates who are Māori, it is possible to identify many similar helpful concepts and mindsets as those that have been identified internationally. Across our differences, human beings share many core motivations or values.

Through the process of colonisation in Aotearoa, Māori ways of life and culture were openly attacked using all the tools people in government and business had. The theft of huge amounts of land continues to do enormous harm to kai-related traditions and by extension many of the practices that are the foundation of Māori wellbeing. At the same time as this attack on Māori culture, many aspects including language, visual imagery, knowledge, and science were also appropriated into non-Māori culture. It is important that those who are not Māori looking to make narrative shifts do so without further appropriating Māori culture, in this case the narratives and values. Instead, we suggest that different groups identify the more helpful mindsets, mythologies, and values within their own traditions and culture.

As the research shows, there are many values present across cultures that work to help us prioritise a food system that nurtures all of us. Each unique narrative can complement and provide strength to each of the other more helpful narratives about food across many groups. As this work is done and relationships and partnerships are built, there is also the opportunity to identify our shared goals and shared values and narratives to be developed.

In a review of local reports from groups working on food system reform in Aotearoa, Cameron (2023) found several shared values that most had in common were:

- **rangatiratanga** — mana whenua leadership and te Tiriti-led partnership with other local residents
- **manaakitanga** — supporting the mana of others through caring and respectful behaviour means no one goes hungry and everyone is valued
- **whanaungatanga** — food can connect us to each other and help us form strong relationships with our communities
- **kaitiakitanga** — mana whenua are able to fully realise their responsibilities for their whenua, and the mana of food-producing environments is protected
- **kotahitanga** — changes to the food system will be made collectively, and we will all benefit collectively.

Other values mentioned less commonly were:

- **ōritetanga** — equal access to food
- **tōnuitanga** — prosperity/abundance of food
- **ūkaipotanga** — connected, community-led wānanga and sharing of knowledge.

Explanatory metaphors to use for the systems narrative

Metaphors connect an everyday thing we know and understand to an abstract or unknown. Used for the purposes of explaining a complex issue, they are an effective cognitive linguistic tool to deepen understanding in a fast-moving information environment where other cognitive models are already dominant.

Depending on what aspect of the food system, what problem, or what solution you want to discuss, different metaphors can be used. We found a number of different tested metaphors that advocates can use to explain both the food system as a whole and different parts of the food system and the impacts it has on people's health.

The runaway food system and foundations of life metaphors to explain the food system as a whole

US-based researchers (FrameWorks Institute, 2006) tested a metaphor they call the runaway food system along with the foundations of life.

These explanatory metaphors were designed to explain that our methods of producing food have become so powerful and are so uncontrolled that they are threatening systems that are vital to our wellbeing.

“Runaway” is a simple way to convey a system that is dangerously out of control while “foundations” (as we discuss in the building metaphor) serve to convey a sense of the fundamental importance to us (concrete and large in scale). Foundations are also able to be damaged or repaired by humans.

These metaphors performed well in testing in terms of increasing understanding of the food system and building support for intervention.

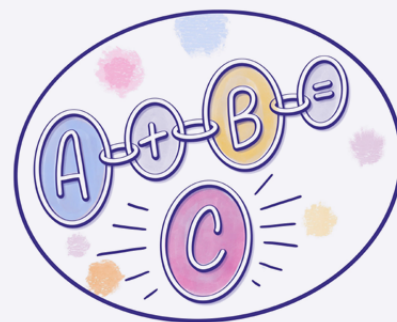
What this sounds like

“Experts are increasingly concerned about what they call our Runaway Food System. The way we produce food today has radically changed, and now has the power to alter the foundations of life as we know it.” (FrameWorks, 2006 p. 12)

The researchers noted it was stronger when used in combination with legacy values and used in a short explanatory chain.

Simple explanations

When people are frequently exposed to shallow and unhelpful ideas, they need to have access to deeper explanations about how a problem started, the impacts, and what works. These explanations need to be simple, easy to process, and ‘cognitively available’ so people can grasp them in a fast-paced information environment. Explanatory metaphors and chains are two ways to simplify complex issues.



Building blocks and foundations of health to explain food as a social determinant of wellbeing

Building metaphors have been found to effectively deepen people’s understanding of the social determinants of health and wellbeing (Phrases & FrameWorks Institute, 2019; The Health Foundation & FrameWorks Institute, 2022).

In the testing, the explanatory metaphor compares health outcomes to a building and social determinants to the foundation of the building. It uses words like “supports,” “built on”, and “holds up” to reinforce this metaphor. Additionally, the metaphor talks about the processes used to create foundations (such as “laying foundations”), implying we have agency to create and change the social determinants that impact our communities.

How to do it according to The Health Foundation and FrameWorks Institute:

- Compare building a healthy society with that of constructing a sturdy building.
- Talk about a thriving community needing all the right building blocks in place: jobs, pay, housing, education, food.
- Explain health inequalities by talking about building blocks that are missing or weak and need replacing — in this case, aspects of the food system.

What this sounds like

“To create a society where everybody can thrive, we need all of the right building blocks in place: stable jobs, good pay, quality housing and good food. But right now, in too many of our communities, blocks are missing. It’s time to fix the gaps.” The Health Foundation & FrameWorks Institute, 2022, p. 8)

In Aotearoa, Te Whare Tapa Whā model of health utilises many building metaphors to explain health (Durie, 1994).

The food system is like an ecosystem to explain economic factors that shape hunger

Hendricks et al. (2018) found an ecosystem metaphor worked to explain the economic determinants of hunger. People who read this metaphor were less likely to say that hunger is a consequence of a person’s choices and more likely to agree that causes were economic in nature — for example, insufficient wages and poor quality work.

What this sounds like

“Our food system ... is like an ecosystem. It’s made of many parts, including the government, which regulates food, people who grow and produce food, the food industry, and people who buy and sell food. These parts need to work together for the whole system to function properly and stay in balance. But things like low wages, high costs of living, and lack of good food nearby disrupt the food ecosystem for people and throw the whole thing out of balance. These disruptions mean that sometimes the food that people need can’t make its way through the system and get to them as it should.” (Hendricks et al., 2018, p. 9)

Explaining physical food environments: a system of imbalanced rivers

Advocates may want to explain interconnections between built environments, food systems, and commercial practices and how these can affect people. The metaphor of a system of imbalanced rivers compares the flow of water to the volume of good nutritious food (L'Hôte et al., 2021). This metaphor was tested on the issue of childhood obesity specifically.

The system of imbalanced rivers metaphor works to highlight causes of poor health as outside of individual control. It highlights specifically the physical environment and can be extended using related terms such as “the trickle of healthy options”. The “floodgates” of advertising or commercial practices can be wide open, causing people, children, and whānau to get “swept downstream” unless we “open new channels for health”.

What this sounds like

“We can improve children’s health ... by improving the flow of affordable, healthy food options and opportunities to run and play. Right now, there is a trickle of healthy affordable food options available to children and families.” (L'Hôte et al., 2021, p. 10)

The metaphor also reduced people’s likelihood to blame parents for children’s poverty by helping people see the causes rather than the outcomes. As flood prevention and protection are activities that happen at national, regional, local, and community levels, it lends itself to thinking that solutions about the food system can happen at all of these levels too.

Framing a lack of healthy food rather than an abundance of unhealthy food may be a more accessible way of talking about the food environment during a cost of living crisis (Jennings & Hyatt, 2022). Talking about too much unhealthy food leads people to reason that children at least are getting some food rather than thinking about the health harms.

What this sounds like

“In too many towns around our country, there’s barely a trickle of healthy options, making it much harder to put healthy food on the table.” (Jennings & Hyatt, 2022, p. 5)

Warning

- ✗ **Avoid:** Crisis framing by making the flood sound too scary or violent, like “a tsunami from which there is no escape”.
- ✓ **Try instead:** “There is only a trickle of good nutritious food available to children in communities while unhealthy options flood in — we need to rebalance.”

- ✗ **Avoid:** Suggesting that the people are the problem (not the system) especially in terms of the framing of facts and data – for example, “child obesity is a serious and growing problem”, “one in three children are obese”, “they are at greater risk of diabetes and other diseases” — people experiencing harms is not the cause of problem.
- ✓ **Try instead:** “We need to improve the health and wellbeing of all children by making sure that everyone can get affordable, healthy food and have the opportunity to run and play.” (L'Hôte et al., 2021, p. 6)

A marketing and advertising stage metaphor to explain food marketing

To explain the influence of food marketing and advertising on children, use a metaphor that explains children as a passive audience to the manipulations of people marketing food, excluding parents from the conversation (L'Hôte et al., 2021).

What this sounds like

“Unhealthy food options are in the spotlight. Aggressive advertising aimed at children and fun promotions in supermarkets cast unhealthy options in a starring role in children’s minds. Healthier food options get lost in the background or are pushed entirely offstage. We need to set the stage for health for all children.” (L'Hôte et al., 2021, p. 12)

In their testing, this metaphor helped counter beliefs that children naturally want high-sugar and high-fat foods. It communicates that this is a designed process and that children’s tastes are being manipulated by those with vested interests.

Talking about obesity

We suggest that the conversation by experts moves away from talking about “obesity” and the issues with “obese and overweight people” for a number of reasons — the most important one being because it dehumanises, others, and harms people. Additionally, it undermines the goals of shifting mindsets and thinking towards systems drivers and solutions.

In an area that is dominated by powerful consumerism, individualism, and otherism narratives, any communication that singles out a group of people based on how they look or their difference cues beliefs about individual effort, choice and behaviour, and zero sum game thinking and narrows people’s thinking about solutions to the consumer/seller relationship and “the market” — for example, “They made bad choices, they need to make responsible choices, they are costing the rest of us.”

Ultimately, while obesity may be of significant concern to experts, as a frame, it is unhelpful, and there are more helpful and less harmful frames that will achieve a healthy food system and better outcomes for all people.

A power grid to explain hunger that is caused by access barriers

Comparing the food system to a power grid helped Americans to understand the geographic barriers to accessing healthy food (Hendricks et al., 2018).

The metaphor compares food to electricity and uses words like “the flow of food” and “patchy coverage” in some places compared to a “well-developed grid” in others.

What this sounds like

“Just like we need a power grid that delivers electricity to all the parts of our country, we also need a grid that allows healthy food to move to all parts of our country. Right now, that grid is well-developed in some areas and patchy or even non-existent in others. For example, some people lack good nearby grocery stores, so the food they need can’t reach them. The end result is that, in many areas of our country, affordable, healthy food is not available.”

(Hendricks et al., 2018, p. 8)

This metaphor may work to support L’Hôte et al.’s (2021) recommendation to talk about equity across places (see Equity values above).

Explanatory chains to use for building a systems narrative

We want people to think more logically about the causes, impacts, and solutions to the food systems problems. To do so, we need to divert them away from unhelpful mindsets like consumerism. Experts and advocates are prone to describing problems in a system in attempts to help people understand. Where unhelpful ways of thinking such as consumerism or modernism are dominant, simply describing a problem doesn’t provide people with an alternative way of thinking about causes and solutions. For example, describing a problem such as food being inaccessible and unaffordable to many families does not help people understand what caused that problem. This means people will fill in those gaps in understanding with “poor choices, market failure, or you are limiting my preferences”.

An explanatory chain combined with metaphors can link the more complex cause with impacts and point people towards the evidence-based solution, diverting them away from thinking this problem is caused by market failure and therefore needs consumer-level intervention for example.

Explanatory chains have:

- **an initial factor (the cause)**
- **a strong middle link (showing impacts) to give people context**
- **a “what works” solution (FrameWorks Institute, 2006).**

Explanatory chains can also use explanatory metaphors to do the heavy lifting of explaining complex ideas.

Explanatory chains use data and facts to advance the narrative — for example, any data and facts about food would be about places and environments affecting people rather than people and their choices and behaviours (L’Hôte et al., 2021). Hendricks et al. (2018) for example found that simply describing that there are economic causes of hunger decreased support for solutions compared to a good explanation.

Runaway food system metaphor within an explanatory chain

Researchers in the US use the runaway food system within an explanatory chain to explain how problems started, the impacts, and what works now to address the problem. In it, they seek to explain the following specific issues:

- The scale and power of current methods of food production and distribution are unprecedented.
- The damage that these methods can cause is unacceptable.
- These powerful methods of food production are currently uncontrolled.

What this sounds like

“Experts are increasingly concerned about what they call our Runaway Food System. The way we produce food today has radically changed, and now has the power to alter the foundations of life as we know it, almost by accident. Farming chemicals like pesticides and weed-killer are permanently altering our soil and water. Genetic engineering is changing the nature of the plants and animals we eat. And mile-long fishing nets are dragging the ocean floor and altering ecosystems. America needs to retake control of this runaway food system before it does more damage to the foundations we depend on.” (FrameWorks, 2006, p. 12)

A balanced food ecosystem nurtures us all — together we thrive narrative

In general, the goal of together we thrive narratives is to bring to the surface people's understanding about shared goals that transcend individual benefits. In relation to food, such narratives will explain, using good data, how an unbalanced food system harms us all and can benefit all of us when balanced. It highlights shared ideas about public good.

Together we thrive can lay out the particular harms done to specific groups (as harms are not equitable) but will also use good explanations to show how these problems spill over to impact different groups and wider society at large. It is a narrative that counters thinking and reasoning about individualistic solutions. For example, if food harms are something that happens to other people over there who are different from me, we only need individual-level interventions like food parcels, budgeting advice, food education, or charity.

Draw on solidarity values that highlight our motivations to support and empower fellow human beings in their struggles, which can be different from our own — for example, food growers working alongside hungry people backing their concerns and solutions.

Highlight also our motivation to care for the environment and each other — for example, protecting places that we love from the damage the current runaway food system is causing.

Use explanations that focus on how a balanced food system nurtures people and creates public good and counters modernism thinking where the goal of a food system is to maximise efficiency and production.

This narrative emphasises the role of collective solutions across communities instead of consumer based action.

For more information, we recommend reading:

[How to talk about preventing poverty: A briefing paper on the narrative and stories that build support for poverty prevention](#)

Frame protection for the places and people we love as a core value

In issues relevant to the environment, previous research has found that cueing people's motivations to care for and protect the places they love helps them to understand environmental issues and build support for policies that protect the environment.

For more information, we recommend reading:

[How to talk about the future of farming in Aotearoa New Zealand](#)

[How to talk about climate change — a toolkit for encouraging collective action](#)

What this sounds like

“For many of us, there are natural places that we love and that we know sustain us. The runaway food system is doing irreversible harm to these rivers, lakes, and forests through the overuse of chemicals and highly extractive farming practices that also hurt the people who farm. We need to protect the places and people we love by taking control of this runaway food system.”

Use the unbalance/rebalanced food system metaphor

This explanatory method can be useful to explain both the impacts on specific groups and of the entire system together.

What this sounds like

“Right now, our food system is out of balance. In our local neighbourhoods and in schools, there is only a trickle of nutritious affordable food for our children while people in the food industry are benefiting from delivering them a flood of nutritionally empty food. This is a food system that is out of balance — leaving all parents having to deal with the impacts in different ways.”

Try the infrastructure of care and connection metaphor

Explaining how a healthy food ecosystem enables us to nurture and care for each other may resonate. Food is intricately tied to care and connection for each other. This metaphor may help explain how problems in the food ecosystem prevent us from fully realising these important aspects of collective living and being.

What this sounds like

“Across different communities, we use food to nurture our connections and relationships with each other. When our food ecosystem is out of balance and people cannot access the food that has meaning for them in ways that work for them, our relationships and connections to each other are also harmed. A healthy food ecosystem is part of the infrastructure of care.”

For more information, we recommend reading:

[How to talk about government and its work for the long term public good](#)

Use explanatory chains to highlight policies that work for people experiencing significant hunger as well as those struggling near the margins (big tent policies)

People tend to think of either very targeted funding or universal funding. Using data to highlight policies that improve life for those most harmed as well as people who can easily tip into harm can counter zero sum game thinking. It means highlighting that all hunger for example is unacceptable and no one should be struggling and nor should we be pitted against one another while the very well-off and people in industries are doing very well.

Use data and facts to highlight this explanation.

What this sounds like

Initial factor: People in the food industry have been allowed to target our children to sell food to. They have put unhealthy food options in the spotlight for all our children.

Impacts: Experts have found there is virtually nowhere in the places children learn, play, and live where they are not being shown advertising for unhealthy food while there is a trickle of

healthy food options in their neighbourhoods. While it is worse in the neighbourhoods where people have less wealth, all children are being subject to this spotlighting of unhealthy food while parents are shut out of the conversation.

Solution: Across our communities, many parents work hard to ensure their children have good food they want to eat that builds their health. We need to set the stage for health for all children and stop advertising to our children.”

Use a short explanatory chain to broaden the term “hunger” and include many people

The term “hunger” generates higher levels of concern among the public. However, non-experts see hunger as referring only to a lack of food and immediate consequences of being hungry. This restricts it to only a few people and specifically excludes fat people.

Experts have a broader understanding of hunger as being about a lack of healthy food and long-term health consequences that are experienced after a chronic lack of food and nutritious food.

Hendricks et al. (2018) recommend communicators should be sure to explain that hunger has a broader definition referring to both a lack of food and a lack of healthy food. It is an especially important explanation to help people understand obesity beyond incorrect and simple models caused by too much food and solved through fasting and extreme dieting (Jennings & Hyatt, 2022).

What this sounds like

“We have a runaway food system that means the way that food is produced and delivered makes too many people hungry — one in eight people in this country experience hunger because they cannot get enough food or enough nutritious food. Hunger leads to many health problems over the longer term, including diabetes, cancer and heart disease. People in policy need to take control of the food system and ensure we all have access to the food we need so no one goes hungry.” (Hendricks et al., 2018, p. 6).

Use a narrative that explains that people who are hungry are capable and solve problems

While it is important to explain the harms that an unbalanced food system does to people, it is important not to cue the otherism mindset that leads to the diminishments and blame of people for the harms they experience as well as zero sum game thinking about effective systems solutions.

An important narrative to counter otherism is one that shows the strength and agency of people harmed by the food system. Highlight their problem-solving solutions, especially in terms of collective problem solving. It is a narrative that also counters strong elements of fatalism thinking.

Such narratives should not be used without a systems narrative. If such stories of determination and agency lack a systems explanation, it can cue more individualism thinking — those people are simply the ones who put in the effort.

Draw on solidarity values

Solidary activates our care for people not through a mindset of charity but through the mindset of shared and intertwined futures — naming that we should not and can not continue to exploit people’s health, especially children’s or those in poverty for example, via an unbalanced food system.

What this sounds like

“Across different communities, parents want to ensure their kids have access to good nutritious food that works for them and their families. However, people in the food industry are exploiting children’s health, making increasingly bigger profits from placing highly processed food centre stage in our children’s world. Parents and caregivers are excluded from the conversation. We can work together and demand children are no longer exploited.”

For more information, we recommend reading:

[How to talk about preventing poverty: A briefing paper on the narrative and stories that build support for poverty prevention](#)

Use the values of self-direction, curiosity, creativity, and problem solving

The Workshop (2021) recommends taking a strengths-based approach when speaking to farmers about land use change by framing it as an opportunity for farming communities to explore new ways of doing things their way. However, it’s important that this is framed as a community’s self-direction rather than for individual farmers (The Workshop, 2021).

What this sounds like

“People in our farming communities are curious and creative people with a sense of responsibility to the land. Working with others, we have the ability here to take meaningful steps to move away from land use that harms the land and water and to creatively tackle the challenges that face our communities today and in the future.”

Explain the collective solutions and how they have worked

Tell the stories of collective community projects where changes have been successfully made (FrameWorks Institute, 2006).

What this sounds like

“In Lower Hutt, people in school communities, the local council, hapū and iwi came together to repair a key foundation of local people’s health — the food system. Working together, people who are hungry, those who grow food, own land, and those who fund services designed a solution to address lack of affordable food, the trickle of nutritious options available, and harms to the whenua from a runaway food production system. What has worked is a series of local food farms based in care for the land and ecosystem. They provide good work, connection points for the community, and food to anyone who needs it.”

Specific food system language to avoid

There are certain terms and frames that people who are not familiar with the conversation and work on food systems understand differently than advocates and experts. It can lead people towards unhelpful mindsets when there is a lack of connection around such terms. We suggest you avoid them.

✗ Avoid “sustainability”

“Sustainability as a concept is enormously powerful, sustainability as a frame is virtually meaningless.” (FrameWorks Institute, 2006, p. 9)

Sustainability if used without context, will bring different ideas than what is intended (Aubrun et al., 2005a). Under individualism and consumerism narratives, research participants viewed “sustainability” as about reducing consumption only and only for others who are perceived as greedy and wasteful (FrameWorks Institute, 2006).

✓ Try instead

Evoking the all-of-us values that the concept represents — legacy, stewardship, and responsible management (Bostrom, 2006).

“Most of us who produce food want to leave a legacy of a land that thrives, that can support the next generation’s health.”

✗ **Avoid “food diversity”**

Talking about improved agricultural diversity did not resonate with research participants (FrameWorks Institute, 2006). People see the current food system as already providing a plethora of food diversity. This is seen as a positive and attributed to global capitalism.

✓ **Try instead**

Explaining the harms of the runaway food system.

✗ **Avoid “food insecurity”**

Testing found that the term “food insecurity” was not well understood. People interpret it variously as about eating disorders, emotional conflict over food choices, and difficulty maintaining a weight-loss regime (Hendricks et al., 2018).

✓ **Try instead**

Broadening the meaning and use of the term “hunger”.

✗ **Avoid ‘in the know’ words — “social justice”, “human rights”, and “fairness”**

FrameWorks Institute (2006) found they do not often resonate with people who do not understand how they are relevant to food systems.

✓ **Try instead**

Using effective prosocial values plus explanations of food systems.

Section 3. Putting it together: making your stories easy to hear and to share

Making stories easy to hear and share: using a vision and values-led story structure

Narratives are threaded throughout our stories, and there is a particular story structure that can help you ensure your big idea or narrative is threaded through your stories

Effective stories start with a vision and values, which creates an invitation for people to first reflect on why what you are talking about is something that matters to them. People need to see there is a barrier, often with a clear agent holding the barrier in place. You can then follow up with simple explanations that show how policy makers and decision makers are not doing the things that matter to them and what the impacts are. A good story then leads people to a natural end that contains a solution that they are able to take action to support.

1. Vision and values — invite people into the issue through the prosocial things that matter to them.
2. Barrier — name what is getting in the way of prioritising the values or vision and who is responsible.
3. Simple explanation — explain the problem using tested simplifying models.
4. Specific solutions — provide clear solutions and include an action for people to take.

Stories

Stories are different tales about particular events and people that appear in different forms across our information environment. At the heart of many stories are shared narratives. Many stories together contribute to building and amplifying specific narratives.



Example story — Controlling our runaway food system using responsible management/legacy values



Opens with responsible management / legacy values

For many of us it's important that people in government and business make sensible decisions for our long-term wellbeing.

Vision for a better food system

Decisions made now need to keep the lives and wellbeing of people who come after in mind. When it comes to food, we want it to be produced in ways that ensure the people who grow it, the people who eat it, and the environment it grows in are well and healthy.

Barrier to this vision

However, it has become very clear that our methods of producing food have become so powerful and are so uncontrolled that they are threatening systems that are vital to our wellbeing and future generations. From the overuse of pesticides and fertilisers harming our soil and water to a focus on producing highly processed foods that weakens farming and food-growing traditions and skills, this runaway food system has the power to damage some of the core building blocks of our health.

Explanatory metaphor

Uses explanatory metaphor "runaway food system" to explain that the power of current food system that out of control

Most experts agree that short-term decisions made by people in government and people in the food system have long-term consequences. There are changes people in government and the food system can make now to regain control of this runaway system — changes that will ensure we have a stable, healthy food system for our children and grandchildren.

Names the agent with power to make change

Repeats of the metaphor

Closes with a reminder of values

Example story — Food: a foundation of our wellbeing



Opens with care and equity values

No matter where we live or what type of food we love, it's important to many of us that we are able to access the food we enjoy and need both to nourish and care for ourselves and others.

Uses "building blocks" metaphor to explain the important role food has in determining our health

Food is one of the most important building blocks of our health and wellbeing for many reasons. It physically nourishes us but also connects us to our culture, to our environment, to the people we care for. However, this building block is being eroded, making our health and wellbeing unstable.

Uses the "trickle" metaphor to show that the food system is out of balance

Across the food ecosystem, things are out of balance. The type of food being produced and made available is controlled by people who are not putting the health of people and the environment first. There is only a trickle of healthy affordable nourishing food options available to many people in the places they live. The focus on food as a way to make money is leaving too many people, including children, hungry and without the nourishing food they need.

Names the agents with power to make change

People in government and in the food industry can work alongside communities to repair this foundation of our health. Communities can work together with food retailers, regulators like local government, food growers, and tangata whenua so good food is grown, gathered, sold, and shared in ways that means everyone gets what they need.

Closes with a reminder of equity values

Who should tell these stories?

Messengers can do a lot of the heavy lifting of a helpful story and narrative. Great messengers are people who are relatable and trusted by people open to persuasion. They work to amplify helpful narratives. Experts do not always make compelling messengers for different audiences.

The research on messengers of food systems suggests the following.

Showcase the diversity of people in our communities

- Feature imagery of people in groups with a diversity of body types to dispel ideas linking body shape and health (Jennings & Hyatt, 2022).
- Show the groups doing things that depict wellbeing such as children playing or learning rather than static or posed images that focus on their body shapes only (Jennings & Hyatt, 2022).
- Show the diversity of people working in the food system — for example, people often think of people who grow food as Pākehā (The Workshop, 2021).

Use trusted local messengers

Jennings & Hyatt (2022) also recommend using teachers as messengers about children's health as they are able to speak about children as a group. They can also speak to how hunger and malnutrition can embed inequality in the longer term (Jennings & Hyatt, 2022).

Tell personal stories across different groups that highlight the system

Hendricks et al. (2018) discuss the value of using personal stories about the experience of food and poverty as a way to combat unhelpful otherism narratives and mindsets. They found that non-prototypical stories — those that focus on the system and don't draw on stereotypical people in poverty — were particularly effective at bringing systemic factors into view. However, they caution against only including stories about the working poor at the risk of worsening the distinction between deserving and undeserving poor people.

We suggest that it is important to use a variety of stories across economic groups to highlight the unbalanced food system and draw together a sense of how “this impacts all of us”.

Case study: Framing nurturing and connection values and creating a sense of agency



“It’s about being co-producers and co-creators with nature. Not above nature, but a part of nature,” says food sovereignty researcher and family food farmer ... at heart it’s about bringing kaupapa Māori back into food and farming in ways that restore and connect local food communities. This involves a return to place-based, small-scale food farming, and building resilient seed banks in every valley. It’s about having more diversity in the landscape – including riparian planting and cleaning up streams as well as growing methods that better sequester carbon, returning it to the soil. This isn’t new korero, says Hutchings. It draws on the past such as Transition Towns conversations. “People have been saying this for years but the time and the urgency is right now, it’s right in front of us.”

— Dr Jessica Hutchings, Founder of Papawhakaritorito Charitable Trust

Read more of this story on Stuff:

[Regeneration nation: What might our future farms look like?](#)

References

- Aubrun, A., Brown, A., & Grady, J. (2005a).** *All trees and no forest: How advocacy paradigms obscure public understanding of the food system.* FrameWorks Institute. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/all-trees-and-no-forest-how-advocacy-paradigms-obscure-public-understanding-of-the-food-system/>
- Aubrun, A., Brown, A., & Grady, J. (2005b).** *Harmful and productive patterns in newspaper representations of food systems.* FrameWorks Institute. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/harmful-and-productive-patterns-in-newspaper-representations-of-food-systems/>
- Aubrun, A., & Grady, J. (2003).** *The agrarian myth revisited: Findings from cognitive elicitations.* FrameWorks Institute. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/agrarianmythrevisited.pdf>
- Bostrom, M. (2006).** *Upside down fate: Analysis of a priming survey exploring views of the food system.* FrameWorks Institute. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/upside-down-fate-analysis-of-a-priming-survey-exploring-views-of-the-food-system/>
- Cameron, S. (2023).** *Realising food secure communities in Aotearoa: A review of locally-led reports, plans and strategies.* Kore Hiakai. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e8e4bf34078e655d8150f64/t/64647cb8c2388178d5d90a27/1684307131781/KH2023-LITERATURE_REVIEW_FINAL_DIGITAL.pdf
- Durie, M. (1994).** *Whaiora: Māori health development.* Oxford University Press.
- FrameWorks Institute. (2006).** *Framing the food system: A FrameWorks message memo.* FrameWorks Institute. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/framing-the-food-system/>
- Hendricks, R., L'Hôte, E., Volmert, A., & O'Neil, M. (2018).** *Reframing hunger in America: A FrameWorks message brief.* FrameWorks Institute. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/reframing-hunger-in-america/>
- Jennings, A., & Hyatt, T. (2022).** *Talking about children's health in a cost of living crisis: A messaging guide.* <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/talking-about-childrens-health-in-a-cost-of-living-crisis/>
- L'Hôte, E., Hawkins, N., & Levay, K. (2021).** *Changing the childhood obesity conversation to improve children's health.* FrameWorks Institute. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/changing-the-childhood-obesity-conversation-to-improve-childrens-health/>
- Miller, T., Volmert, A., Rochman, A., & Aassar, M. (2021).** *Talking about poverty: Narrative, counter-narrative and telling effective stories.* FrameWorks Institute. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/talking-about-poverty-narratives-counter-narratives-and-telling-effective-stories>

Phrases & FrameWorks Institute. (2019). *Foundation of community health: A metaphor for how the health of a community is supported by the work of professionals in many different sectors.* FrameWorks Institute. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/message-card-foundation-of-community-health-phrases/>

The Health Foundation & FrameWorks Institute. (2022). *How to talk about the building blocks of health.* FrameWorks Institute & The Health Foundation. <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/how-to-talk-about-the-building-blocks-of-health>

The Workshop. (2021). *How to talk about the future of farming in Aotearoa New Zealand.* The Workshop. <https://www.theworkshop.org.nz/publications/how-to-talk-about-the-future-of-farming-in-aotearoa-new-zealand-2021>

Published by: The Workshop

Graphic Design: Catherine Adam
Wonderbird Photography & Design Studio
www.wonderbird.nz

Illustrations: Megan Salole
www.salole.co.nz

