

Redefining Diets in New Zealand

Knowing what's in our food is vital to preventing dietary diseases such as obesity and diabetes. But as many barely glance at the nutrition facts on their food, policies should be implemented in order to keep harmful ingredients out of citizens' food. New Zealand struggles with rising diabetes and obesity rates, partly because of a lack of government oversight on monitoring what is in their citizens' food. In order to make dietary changes we must start from the source, the food that we eat. To help spark that change, I will outline three key aspects that must be included in that new government policy, including accessibility, affordability and sustainability of food.

Accessibility

Two of the biggest underlying factors causing dietary diseases across the globe are food deserts and lack of knowledge. Low income individuals are hit the hardest by these, especially in New Zealand. The typical family in New Zealand ranges from two to four people, usually two parents with one to two kids per household. Although race and culture do take a significant role in family makeup there. *AFS-USA* states that around one third of families from European descent living in New Zealand tend to be older couples. And a quarter of families with Māori or Pacific ethnicity are single parents. The Māori and Pasifika groups are the most at risk for food insecurity and dietary diseases. A February 2024 release from *Stats NZ* states that one in four Pasifika children experience material hardship. Kate Shuttleworth from *The Guardian* states that the people of New Zealand are not given much choice when selecting food, as there is mostly processed food on the market. As these processed foods are often the cheapest options, the more financially limited New Zealanders are, the more likely they are to consume low quality foods. Those living in the under-resourced areas of New Zealand are hit the hardest by dietary diseases due to a poor diet.

The best way to shine a light on this issue is by implementing government-funded programs to create accessible and affordable food options that are healthy. Food hubs would be a great way to start making nutritious foods more accessible in New Zealand. In order to be the most beneficial, these hubs should be placed in the Northland area, as about 84.9% of Māori families live in this region, which suffer from high cardiovascular disease rates, such as type II diabetes. This would allow for better access to healthy and local foods for low prices and would also provide revenue to the food hubs suppliers. Local foods and farmers can also be supported through farmers markets. While providing nutritious local food, these markets can also increase community engagement, which will spark a local passion for fresh healthy foods.

On the local level, food hubs and farmers markets are very beneficial, but implementing federal food access programs is also very important on a larger scale. A program similar to The Emergency Food Access Program, also known as TEFAP, would be very beneficial in these poverty-stricken areas in New Zealand. Having access to affordable, yet nutritious, foods would greatly encourage citizens to better their diets and inform themselves about what they are eating. Using government funds to increase access to healthy foods in food deserts would help the overall health of citizens. The

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, referred to informally as SNAP, is another federal food access program in the United States has been linked with lower healthcare costs and even lower risk of heart disease, reports Steven Carlson and Joseph Llobrera from the *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*. Implementing a program similar to this would bring great change to the Northland area. The biggest obstacle in this would be getting the government to take action, although if enough people speak up and bring light to the urgency of this situation, the government will begin to take action. Citizens can encourage the government to take charge in this issue by writing to their representatives and by participating in boycotts and protests, if needed. By providing programs specifically made for under-resourced families who are hit the hardest by dietary diseases, healthy foods can be made to be affordable and accessible promoting a healthier lifestyle for the New Zealand population.

Affordability

When looking for a solution to the dietary diseases that are caused by food insecurity, the producers of cheap and unhealthy foods must be managed. Cheap processed foods that are sold in grocery stores are a leading cause of poor diets in citizens, so we must pull the problem out by the roots at the source. Putting restrictions on certain ingredients can help nip the bud. Many harmful products sold in the United States are already banned in New Zealand, as their *Ministry for Primary Industries* does have codes of practice and hazard analysis systems in place. However, as one in three deaths in New Zealand are caused by cardiovascular disease, according to the *Heart Foundation*, these rules should be revisited. As these diseases are most rampant among people who earn less, the Joint Food Standards should be revised in order to not only ban harmful ingredients, but also require products to meet basic nutritional standards. For example, cereal brands such as Kellogg's should be held to better nutritional standards for protein and fiber. Putting these restrictions on large brands that are sold here would promote better health as these brands have large amounts of consumers.

As many people have no other choice but to buy cheap, and less nutritional products due to income, regulations should be passed in order to help healthy foods become more affordable as well. *The Ministry for Primary Industries* should reposition their priorities toward agricultural subsidies. This would not only keep prices for nutritious food low, it would also support farmers in New Zealand and help the growing agricultural industries.

While New Zealand currently exports most of their farming yields, a subsidy would allow for increased agricultural production and the crops that are now mostly exported would be made available to citizens for low prices. Many nutritious fruits and vegetables can be grown in New Zealand, such as spinach, lettuce, cabbage, chickpeas, quinoa and their native fruit, the kiwi. As the soil here is very diverse, being made of a mix of clays, granular, oxidic, podzolized and yellow-brown soils a variety of food can be grown. By making fresh foods grown locally as accessible and affordable as processed foods, people would be given opportunities to broaden their diets to include more nutritious foods. Incentives can also be put into place to encourage smaller farmers to produce more by providing them government assistance. Countries such as Switzerland, which is ranked very high in public health, have adopted these

programs and found great success. These measures protect farmland and contribute to the preservation of biodiversity, says Stuart Harrison in the *Small Farmers Journal* in Switzerland.

By prioritizing higher amounts of government funding toward agriculture, New Zealand can have the same outcomes as these countries. Prioritizing local food production and farmer incentives is the key to giving the community healthier and cheaper food options in stores and better protected farmlands. By giving citizens more accessibility and options, governments empower citizens to start a well-balanced diet.

Sustainability

The implementation of programs like agricultural subsidies and food requirements should also be planned with environmental impact in mind. Agricultural subsidies are a great start to this as they promote biodiversity and preserve farmland. Although, if not planned out, farming can be an environmental burden. This is why implementing rules and restrictions on the farms, along with subsidies, is vital. They must follow ecological and ethical farming practices like buffers, crop rotation and cover cropping. One way to help ensure this would be by providing incentives to farmers who adopt sustainable agricultural methods. This would allow for citizens to experience the benefits of subsidies while also promoting farming methods that are ethical. Giving farmers tax breaks and direct federal payments would be a great way for the Ministry of Primary Industries to incentivize farmers and hold them accountable under subsidies.

Another environmental factor needing to be considered would be transportation, as there would be more farmers transporting products under these subsidies. Keeping this in mind there would be an increased carbon footprint as a result, so incentives would also need to be implemented to encourage farmers to switch to low carbon transportation, such as electric vehicles, known informally as EVs. The public would also need to be accounted for, especially if markets and stores are hard to access from some areas, as a result public transportation could be used in low income areas to help increase access. For public transportation, EVs would be the most sustainable option and for this to happen legislation that promotes accessibility across all geographies would need to be passed with dedication. *Health Affairs* states that increased access to public transportation helps reduce health disparities and increased access to vital things such as medical care. This would make a huge impact on dietary diseases in these communities, as citizens would have transportation to markets that, thanks to subsidies, would carry affordable healthy food options. For folks with pre-existing dietary diseases, public transportation would allow for them to access better care. On top of this, public transportation can help the community become more active, according to the *U.S Department of Transportation*, which states that 29% of survey respondents said they were able to achieve 30 minutes of exercise from walking to public transportation. This would be vital for the overall health and wellness of the average Kiwi, and a great way to reduce stress as well. Switching to using EVs for public transportation and for farmers under incentives would make this funding not only support the health of the general public, but also the health of the environment.

The food we eat is the root cause of dietary diseases and it is up to the government to enact change to create accessible healthy options for everyone. Much

like the United States, New Zealand struggles with high rates of dietary diseases because of a lack of affordable and nutritious food. As we've discussed, this is especially true for families who earn less money. By implementing agricultural subsidies and growing opportunities for farmers to keep their harvest for domestic consumption, the government can help create change. Making these changes will yield positive results that other nations such as the United States should learn from. By allocating funding toward this issue the New Zealand parliament can provide their citizens with not only nutritious foods and jobs but also a better quality of life.

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