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Food Sovereignty, Whakapapa, and Place

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ABSTRACT

Food sovereignty is increasingly promoted as an alternative to dominant food systems. In Aotearoa it is inseparable from Māori relationships to whenua and from colonial dispossession. This paper presents a kaupapa Māori review of academic, policy, and grey literature, with insights from the Manawatū region. Food sovereignty is conceptualised as a relational geography grounded in whakapapa and tino rangatiratanga. The analysis argues that food sovereignty cannot be separated from Māori food sovereignty, given Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations and enduring constraints that shape food systems. It also proposes that food sovereignty can be enabled through healing social and environmental relationalities.

1 | Introduction

Food sovereignty has gained traction in Aotearoa (New Zealand) as an alternative to dominant industrial food systems, appearing across academic scholarship, policy discourse, and community-led initiatives. It is commonly mobilised in response to concerns about food insecurity, environmental degradation, and the social and ecological consequences of export-oriented agriculture (Bartos 2016; Centre for Social Impact 2023; Withers 2020). Despite this growing interest, food sovereignty is often framed as a technical, localised, or resilience-oriented project. The concept insufficiently engages with Māori (the Indigenous people of Aotearoa) sovereignty, the colonial foundations of contemporary food systems, and Te Tiriti o Waitangi, an agreement of partnership between the British Crown and Māori chiefs which affirms Māori self-determination and establishes enduring Crown obligations to Māori (Hutchings 2015; Kore Hiakai 2024; Wright 2024). Such framings are analytically limited and politically inadequate, as they risk reducing food sovereignty to a set of policy tools or local interventions rather than recognising it as a fundamentally political and relational project.

Food systems in Aotearoa are inseparable from the histories and ongoing effects of colonisation, including land dispossession,

the restructuring of Māori economies, and the marginalisation of Māori authority within governance arrangements (Oldham et al. 2024; Wiremu et al. 2022). Prior to European contact, Māori communities were food sovereign, with access to abundant and diverse food systems grounded in mahinga kai (Māori food systems and food gathering places) and sustained through enduring relationships with whenua (land), moana (water bodies), and kai (food) (Wiremu et al. 2022). Following the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi in 1840 (Walker 2007), colonial processes systematically alienated Māori from land and food resources, disrupting these relationships and embedding Māori food worlds within colonial-capitalist political economies (Oldham et al. 2024; Wiremu et al. 2022). Contemporary debates about food sovereignty, therefore, sit within a context where questions of food, land, and wellbeing are inseparable from struggles for tino rangatiratanga (Māori self-determination) and the ongoing constitutional relationship between Māori and the Crown (Kore Hiakai 2024).

This paper presents a kaupapa Māori (Māori approach) synthesis of literature on food sovereignty in Aotearoa, with particular attention to Māori food sovereignty and place-based insights from the Manawatū region. Originally undertaken to inform a wider research project, this review is presented as a critical

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geographical synthesis of contemporary food sovereignty scholarship in Aotearoa. Drawing on Indigenous scholarship, critical public health, and human geography, the paper approaches food sovereignty not as a universal framework or technical policy goal, but as a relational and political project shaped by colonial histories, Indigenous resurgence, and ongoing struggles over whenua, governance, and food systems (Huambachano 2019; Hutchings 2015). This paper uses a geographical lens to foreground how food sovereignty is constituted through relationships between people, place, and governance across scales.

There are two central arguments advanced in this paper. The first is that separating food sovereignty from Māori food sovereignty in Aotearoa is analytically untenable. Commitments established through Te Tiriti o Waitangi position sovereignty as contingent on Māori sovereignty and therefore food sovereignty within ongoing obligations to Māori authority, land, and governance (Kore Hiakai 2024). Food sovereignty is inherently a site of resistance to dominant food systems that are themselves products of colonisation; therefore, in an Aotearoa context, food sovereignty sits within wider struggles for tino rangatiratanga. The second is that enabling food sovereignty in Aotearoa ultimately means healing relationalities both between different groups of people, in particular Māori and the Crown, and between people and the environment.

The paper proceeds by discussing the methods used to collect and analyse literature. Part one then outlines understandings of food sovereignty in Aotearoa with a particular focus on Māori conceptualisations, situating food sovereignty within Indigenous and Māori relational geographies. Part two of this paper outlines food sovereignty as a place-based, political project, synthesising relational enablers of food sovereignty in Aotearoa. The conclusion then outlines key takeaways and contributions to the literature. This paper translates te reo Māori (the Māori language) words in parentheses after first use. All translations are tailored for their specific context within this paper and may not serve well as universal definitions.

2 | Methods

This paper is authored by three Māori researchers with interests and experience in the Māori food sovereignty space. It draws on a kaupapa Māori-informed rapid review of literature examining food sovereignty in Aotearoa, with a particular focus on Māori food sovereignty and place-based insights from the Manawatū region. The authors adopted the Cochrane Rapid Review method (Garritty et al. 2024) to enable a timely yet systematic synthesis of academic, policy, and grey literature relevant to food sovereignty in Aotearoa. Cochrane is a global, independent, network of researchers and professionals who aim to provide high-quality health information to improve healthcare worldwide. The Cochrane Rapid Review, which was developed by the Cochrane Rapid Review Methods group, is a type of synthesis that gathers and summarises information to produce evidence for a wide range of health stakeholders (Cochrane Rapid Reviews Methods Group, n.d.).

The review was conducted through a kaupapa Māori lens, guided by the Te Whatu Aho Rau Evaluation Framework (Feekery and

Tawhai 2024). This framework centres Māori knowledge systems, relational accountability, and Indigenous self-determination within research and evaluation processes. Te Whatu Aho Rau ensures that Māori epistemologies and priorities shape both the scope of inquiry and the interpretation of findings. Rather than positioning Māori knowledge as supplementary to Western academic frameworks, the review treats mātauranga (Māori knowledge) as foundational to understanding food sovereignty in Aotearoa.

An initial search identified 351 documents across academic databases and grey literature, including iwi (tribe) and hapū (sub-tribe) plans, government strategies, and community reports. Following screening for relevance and analytical depth, 53 documents were selected for full review. Paying special attention to activity occurring in the Manawatū region, the authors aimed to use the review to: (a) identify key themes, definitions, and indicators of food sovereignty in Aotearoa, (b) explore governance and policy issues impacting food sovereignty, and (c) explore community-based initiatives actively combating food sovereignty. The remainder of this article utilises the rapid review to outline contemporary debates shaping food sovereignty in Aotearoa.

3 | Part 1—Understanding Food Sovereignty From an Aotearoa Perspective

Food sovereignty is very much place-based and understandings of it are not static or universal; they are mobilised and reworked within specific historical, cultural, and geographical contexts. In Aotearoa, there is a specific way of understanding and practicing food sovereignty, and this is evident in the literature. This section will briefly discuss the conceptual foundations of food sovereignty, Indigenous food sovereignty, and Māori food sovereignty in Aotearoa. To conclude this section, we use key debates in the literature to argue that understanding food sovereignty as separate to Māori food sovereignty in Aotearoa is analytically unhelpful.

3.1 | Food Sovereignty

The concept of food sovereignty is commonly traced to La Vía Campesina, an international movement defending peasant agriculture, who coined the concept in 1996 (Huambachano 2020). La Vía Campesina later refined the definition during the 2007 Declaration of Nyéléni (Forum for Food Sovereignty 2007). Here, they reframed food sovereignty as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” (p. 1). The Nyéléni declaration explicitly centres peoples rather than nations and positions food sovereignty as a challenge to corporate and market-led food systems. In doing so, it foregrounds questions of agency, governance, and power, situating food sovereignty as a fundamentally political project. This definition foregrounds rights, cultural diversity, and national capacity, and has been widely mobilised within scholarship and policy discussions in Aotearoa.

Food sovereignty is inherently decolonial, it contests dominant food systems introduced through colonial-capitalism,

characterised by export orientation, corporate concentration, genetic engineering, and the commodification of food, and land (Hutchings 2015, 2016; Hanna and Wallace 2022; Murupaenga-Ikenn 2024; Whanganui Kai Collective 2021; Wiremu et al. 2022). Huambachano (2024) situates contemporary food sovereignty movements within long histories of resistance to colonialism and capitalism, highlighting how food sovereignty responds to violent dispossession, exploitation, and the disruption of Indigenous lifeways. Food sovereignty movements in Aotearoa specifically, strongly resist genetic engineering, particularly in Indigenous contexts where genetic modification is understood to disrupt whakapapa (genealogical and relational connections) and the integrity of living systems (Hutchings 2016).

Food sovereignty is also restorative, working to reinstate alternative food relations grounded in care for people, land, and ecosystems (Hanna and Wallace 2022; Hutchings 2016; Murupaenga-Ikenn 2024; Whanganui Kai Collective 2021; Wiremu et al. 2022). Food sovereignty practices, work to re-establish relations with te taiao (the natural environment), revitalise traditional food systems, and strengthen community-led and localised food networks (Burgess and Koroi 2024; Centre for Social Impact 2023; Greenaway 2023; Hardy et al. 2024; Harmsworth 2023; Huambachano 2019, 2020, 2024; Hutchings 2016; Hutchings and Smith 2020; Hutchings et al. 2018; Smith and Hutchings 2024; Withers 2020; Wright 2024). These restorative practices, emphasise food as a relational process rather than a commodity, foregrounding care, reciprocity, and responsibility. In this framing, food sovereignty is not simply about improving food access or localising production, but about reclaiming control over land, seeds, water, labour, and knowledge systems. In the literature we reviewed, it is framed as both a concept of resistance and restoration which is particularly grounded in Indigenous understandings. Thus, we now turn to Indigenous food sovereignty.

3.2 | Indigenous Food Sovereignty

Indigenous food sovereignty extends beyond food security or rights-based approaches, emphasising instead the revitalisation of foodways grounded in Indigenous values, ecological knowledge, and responsibilities to human and non-human relations (Huambachano 2019, 2020, 2024). Two aspects become important here: One, the literature positions Indigenous food sovereignty as a relational concept that binds food, land, governance, and identity across space and time. Across many Indigenous contexts, the world is understood not as a collection of discrete entities but as a web of interconnected relationships. Food is commonly described as a sacred gift that emerges through relationships between people, land, water, plants, animals, and spiritual beings (Huambachano 2020). Two, these relational ontologies challenge individualised and commodified understandings of food, framing food sovereignty as a collective responsibility embedded within ethical obligations to both human and more-than-human kin.

Indigenous food sovereignty is inherently geographical. While shared principles may exist across Indigenous food sovereignty movements, food practices and governance are shaped by specific ecologies, histories, and cultural frameworks in

place. As such, Indigenous food sovereignty cannot be reduced to a singular definition or model; it is enacted contextually through relationships in place (Huambachano 2019; Wiremu et al. 2022). Place is not a backdrop for Indigenous food sovereignty, but constitutive of how food relations, responsibilities, and authority are understood and practised. Indigenous food sovereignty is also multitemporal, operating across past, present, and future generations through intergenerational knowledge and responsibility (Wiremu et al. 2022). It is inseparable from continuity, memory, and long-term relational accountability. In Aotearoa, Māori understandings of food sovereignty are shaped by distinct constitutional, historical, and place-based relationships.

3.3 | Understanding Māori Food Sovereignty

Sovereignty is a contested concept in Aotearoa given its association with colonial authority and ongoing debates over Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Oldham et al. 2024). Māori scholars often reframe food sovereignty, emphasising authority exercised through collective responsibility and care (Paora et al. 2011). Terms such as rangatiratanga o te kai, kai sovereignty, mahinga kai, and kai motuhake represent Māori-centred concepts of authority, self-determination, and responsibility in relation to food systems, grounded in whakapapa, tikanga (Māori customs), and relationships with te taiao (Kore Hiakai 2024; Roskrug 2024; Shelling 2023). For analytical clarity, this paper retains the term Māori food sovereignty while recognising these important alternative framings.

Māori food sovereignty is specifically shaped by tangata whenua (people of the land) and their epistemologies. It is best understood as a contextual and place-based expression of Indigenous food sovereignty, grounded in long-standing knowledge systems developed through sustained relationships with whenua, moana, and kai (Kore Hiakai 2024). Māori food sovereignty is inseparable from Māori wellbeing and self-determination, supporting social, physical, and emotional health while reaffirming collective responsibility to people and environment (Shelling 2023; Withers 2020). Fundamentally, Māori food sovereignty is a process of returning to and restoring relationships with te taiao (Hutchings and Smith 2020).

Whakapapa is foundational to Māori food sovereignty. As a key Māori epistemology, whakapapa positions all human and non-human entities as genealogically connected across time and space (Mikaere 2011). Within food systems, whakapapa provides knowledge about where food comes from, how it is connected to place, and the obligations that arise through these relationships (Burgess and Koroi 2024; Greenaway 2023; Hutchings et al. 2022; Hutchings and Smith 2020; Kore Hiakai 2024). Through a whakapapa lens, food is inseparable from the environments, people, and atua (Māori deities) through which it emerges (Burgess and Koroi 2024). Burgess and Koroi (2024), for example, describe food as emerging through layered relationships of whanaungatanga (relationship building) with atua, te taiao, and tangata (people).

Whakapapa also situates Māori food sovereignty as inherently intergenerational and place-based. Food sovereignty practices

are carried out not only for present wellbeing, but to honour ancestral relationships and ensure sustenance for future generations (Kore Hiakai 2024). The place-based nature of whakapapa means that Māori food sovereignty looks different across iwi and hapū, shaped by distinct ecologies, histories, and knowledge systems (Burgess and Koroi 2024; Kore Hiakai 2024). By articulating relationships and responsibilities, whakapapa provides an ethical framework that prioritises whanaungatanga and the wellbeing of both human and non-human relations (Painting and Burgess 2020).

Prior to European contact in Aotearoa, food sovereignty was inherently built into Māori lifeways, and many Māori groups shared abundant and diverse food systems sustained through mahinga kai and enduring whakapapa relationships with whenua and moana (Wiremu et al. 2022). Whakapapa relations between people and the environment, for example, obliged both people to look after the environment and the environment to look after people (Forster 2019; Painting and Burgess 2020; Rout et al. 2021). These relations created a cycle of ongoing reciprocity between people and the environment which, among other benefits, provided a healthy supply of food. Post-European contact and following the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi in 1840, colonial-capitalist processes systematically alienated Māori from their land and ocean resources, fundamentally disrupting their food relations and authority over mahinga kai (Oldham et al. 2024; Wiremu et al. 2022).

Contemporary Māori food sovereignty is a situated response to historical dispossession and an ongoing project of restoration and resurgence that seeks to re-establish whakapapa relationships between people, place, and food intergenerationally (Roskrue 2024; Wiremu et al. 2022). It involves reclaiming tino rangatiratanga and resisting dominant food systems which are shaped by colonial capitalism, producing enduring inequalities in food access, governance, and environmental health (Bartos 2016; Huambachano 2018, 2019; Hutchings 2015; Hutchings and Smith 2020; Hutchings et al. 2022; Kore Hiakai 2024; Wiremu et al. 2022; Withers 2020).

We conclude this section by arguing that separating food sovereignty from Māori food sovereignty in contemporary Aotearoa is analytically unhelpful. There are two key reasons for this. The first is related to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Kore Hiakai (2024) discusses the relationship between Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Māori food sovereignty below;

Te Tiriti o Waitangi established that sovereignty in Aotearoa New Zealand is intricately linked to Māori sovereignty. Māori food sovereignty is therefore linked to Māori sovereignty. We cannot claim food sovereignty or security for anyone, until we begin to resolve Māori sovereignty (p. 13).

Kore Hiakai (2024) position Māori food sovereignty as part of the wider struggle for Māori sovereignty. They also establish that in the context of Aotearoa and Te Tiriti o Waitangi, sovereignty cannot be understood or realised without Māori sovereignty. If sovereignty cannot be understood or realised without Māori sovereignty then we can in turn argue, as Kore Hiakai

point to above, that food sovereignty cannot be realised or understood without Māori food sovereignty.

The second key reason is related to the political nature of food sovereignty. The literature establishes that food sovereignty is inherently decolonial (Hanna and Wallace 2022; Huambachano 2024; Hutchings 2015, 2016; Murupaenga-Ikenn 2024; Forum for Food Sovereignty 2007; Whanganui Kai Collective 2021; Wiremu et al. 2022). Decolonisation from an Aotearoa context can be defined as “dismantling unjust colonial structures, reimagining and reconstructing Indigenous lifeways (ways of meeting physical, spiritual and social needs), and establishing just relationships among peoples of Aotearoa into the future” (Scobie and Sturman 2024, 8). Adopting these understandings, we can conceptualise food sovereignty as a process which works to subordinate colonial-capitalist food systems and restore mahinga kai and tino rangatiratanga. Food sovereignty in Aotearoa cannot be understood or realised without Māori food sovereignty.

Food sovereignty in Aotearoa is shaped by Māori relationships to whenua, kai, and governance, and by the constitutional commitments established through Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Kore Hiakai 2024). Māori food sovereignty provides the relational and political foundation upon which broader claims to food sovereignty rest. Understanding how food sovereignty is enabled or constrained in Aotearoa requires attention to the relational dimensions that support Māori authority and collective food systems, as well as the structural conditions that continue to undermine them.

4 | Part Two—Enabling Food Sovereignty in Aotearoa

Part two develops the paper's second central argument: that enabling food sovereignty in Aotearoa ultimately requires healing relationalities. The literature consistently positions food sovereignty not simply as an outcome of policy or production, but as a relational process enabled through interconnected environmental, social, and place-based conditions. This section first examines environmental relationalities before turning to social relationalities and concluding with place-based insights from Manawatū.

4.1 | Enabling Food Sovereignty—Environmental Considerations

A central dimension enabling food sovereignty in Aotearoa concerns relationships between people and the environments that sustain them. Across the literature, these relationships are understood as fundamental to food sovereignty, particularly relationships with land and place (Burgess and Koroi 2024; Elers 2024; Huambachano 2019; Hutchings et al. 2022; Wright 2024). Rather than treating environmental factors as discrete enablers or barriers, the literature positions them as relational conditions that have been disrupted through colonisation and require restoration for food sovereignty to flourish. In this section we discuss the effects of colonialism and capitalism on the environment and Māori-environment relations and explore ongoing impacts on Māori food sovereignty.

Colonialism and capitalism are repeatedly described as mutually reinforcing processes shaping contemporary food systems in Aotearoa (Burgess and Koroi 2024; Harmsworth 2023; Hutchings 2016; Hutchings et al. 2022; McKerchar et al. 2015; McLellan 2020; Morris and Fitzherbert 2016; Oldham et al. 2024; Shelling 2023). The incorporation of Māori economies into British capitalist systems reshaped Māori food relations, not by replacing relational food practices, but by imposing commodity and accumulation logics that often sat uneasily alongside enduring whakapapa-based food systems (Morris and Fitzherbert 2016). Hutchings et al. (2022), describe this system as “an insidious form of colonisation” (p. 13) that continues to displace Māori food values and practices.

Colonial land dispossession is consistently identified as a challenge to food sovereignty in Aotearoa (Greenaway 2023; Huambachano 2022; Kore Hiakai 2024; Wright 2024). Land dispossession permanently disrupted mahinga kai, severing reciprocal relationships between people, whenua, and food (Hanna and Wallace 2022; Kore Hiakai 2024). These disruptions produced not only material deprivation but enduring relational harm, including intergenerational trauma and loss of cultural food knowledge (Burgess and Koroi 2024; Hutchings et al. 2022). These processes stripped many Māori groups of access to ancestral food-gathering areas, creating ongoing barriers to the practice and revitalisation of mahinga kai (Hanna and Wallace 2022; Kawharu et al. 2022; McLellan 2020; Morris and Fitzherbert 2016; Shelling 2023). Mid-twentieth-century Māori urban migration, driven by Crown policy and economic pressures (Hutchings et al. 2022; Kawharu et al. 2022; Shelling 2023; Walker et al. 2019), further disconnected Māori from their land-based food relations (Hutchings et al. 2022; Kawharu et al. 2022).

A significant consequence of colonial land dispossession is the erosion of mātauranga related to kai. As Indigenous foods have diminished through disconnection from land, so too has knowledge of cultivation, harvesting, and use (Wiremu et al. 2022). The literature consistently links the loss of food knowledge to ongoing constraints on food sovereignty (Greenaway 2023; Hardy et al. 2024; Hutchings et al. 2022; Severinsen and Reweti 2024; Miller 2021; Withers 2020).

Environmental degradation is also identified as a significant barrier to food sovereignty in Aotearoa (Burgess and Koroi 2024; McKerchar et al. 2015; McLellan 2020; Wright 2024). Industrial agriculture, for example, contributes to soil degradation, contamination, erosion, and biodiversity loss, undermining the ecological foundations of food systems (Bartos 2016; Burgess and Koroi 2024; Hutchings et al. 2018; Kawharu et al. 2022). Climate change compounds these challenges by increasing weather unpredictability and extreme events, threatening both commercial and customary food systems (Hardy et al. 2024; Hutchings et al. 2012; Kawharu et al. 2022).

Colonial-capitalist relations continue to shape contemporary food systems in ways that further constrain food sovereignty. Across the literature, dominant food systems are characterised by export-oriented production, corporate concentration, and the commodification of food, limiting communities' capacity to exercise authority over food production, distribution,

and consumption (Centre for Social Impact 2023; Hanna and Wallace 2022; Hutchings 2015; Morris and Fitzherbert 2016). As such, contemporary food systems actively reproduce the relational conditions established through colonisation, reinforcing dependence on global markets while undermining local autonomy and food sovereignty.

Several structural features of dominant food systems are highlighted in the literature as particularly constraining. Export-oriented agriculture prioritises overseas markets at the expense of local food access, producing the paradox of food abundance alongside food insecurity (Bartos 2014, 2016; Hutchings 2015; Kawharu et al. 2022; Richardson 2023). Corporate concentration, including the supermarket duopoly in Aotearoa, further limits diversity and local autonomy within food landscapes (Centre for Social Impact 2023; Richardson 2023). Dominant food systems produce social and spatial disconnections between people and the environments that produce their food, undermining the relational foundations required for food sovereignty (Hanna and Wallace 2022; McKerchar et al. 2015; Richardson 2023). While outlining several barriers to people-environment relations, the literature also outlines key pathways to healing these relations and enabling food sovereignty in Aotearoa.

Soil and seed sovereignty are repeatedly identified as integral to healing relational ecologies and enabling food sovereignty (Harmsworth 2023; Hutchings 2015; Hutchings et al. 2012, 2022; Hutchings and Smith 2020; Huambachano 2019; Moeke-Pickering et al. 2015; Withers 2020). Soil is understood as foundational to life, wellbeing, and cultural fulfilment, with soil health inseparable from the health of people and ecosystems (Harmsworth 2023). Seed sovereignty, including seed saving and exchange, enables self-determination over food production while resisting genetic engineering and the commodification of life (Hutchings 2015, 2016). Together, soil, seed, and food sovereignty form a symbiotic relationship in which strengthening one enhances the others. The following two paragraphs will highlight two key concepts that are foundational to Māori environmental relations and, therefore, food sovereignty.

Mahinga kai is a key expression of the relational ecologies of food sovereignty. Mahinga kai includes both food gathering and growing sites and the practice of procuring this food (Phillips et al. 2016). Reinvigorating mahinga kai involves restoring traditional cultivation, harvesting, and governance practices while revitalising the mātauranga that sustains them (Centre for Social Impact 2023; Huambachano 2019; Hutchings 2016; Hutchings and Smith 2020; Miller 2021; Roskrige 2024; Shelling 2023). Knowledge transmission through wānanga (a culturally grounded, collective process for sharing, discussing, and generating knowledge), kōrero tuku iho (historical stories), karakia (incantation), maramataka (Māori lunar calendar), and intergenerational learning is also central to sustaining these mahinga kai (Burgess and Koroi 2024; Wiremu et al. 2022; Wright 2024). Reciprocal obligations are central to people-environment relations and, therefore, food sovereignty.

Huambachano (2020) describes food sovereignty as a process through which humans enhance the environment while the environment enhances human wellbeing. For Māori, obligations

to the environment are enacted through kaitiakitanga, which involves balanced relationships with land and ecosystems when producing and gathering food (Hutchings et al. 2022; McLellan 2020; Smith and Hutchings 2024; Withers 2020; Wright 2024). It extends beyond sustainable resource use to actively enhancing the mauri (life force) of whenua and ecosystems (Smith and Hutchings 2024). Kaitiakitanga is commonly misunderstood as environmental stewardship. Although it involves environmental stewardship, it is based on a particular relationship between people and the environment in place (Rout et al. 2021). Kaitiakitanga, therefore, inherently involves tangata whenua, as Rout et al. (2021), state, “the practice of kaitiakitanga requires the mana whenua [people with territorial rights over land] linked with resources in a particular locality” (p. 5). Kaitiakitanga is vital for enabling food sovereignty in Aotearoa. A second relational dimension enabling food sovereignty concerns collectivism, governance, and social organisation.

4.2 | Enabling Food Sovereignty—Social Considerations

Across the literature, food sovereignty is framed as inherently collective, involving shared rights, responsibilities, and decision-making within food systems (Burgess and Koroi 2024; Hardy et al. 2024; Huambachano 2018, 2019; Withers 2020; Wright 2024). Collective action and practices enable community engagement, knowledge sharing, and social cohesion, fostering empowerment and resilience within food systems (Hardy et al. 2024). Community-led, collective food systems are repeatedly identified as key expressions of collective governance for enabling food sovereignty (Centre for Social Impact 2023; Eberly 2023; Greenaway 2023; Huambachano 2019; Severinsen and Reweti 2024; Miller 2021). These systems prioritise local self-determination across food production, distribution, and consumption processes and practices (Balle and Watts 2022; Hardy et al. 2024; Hutchings et al. 2022; Kawharu et al. 2022; Palmerston North City Council 2024; Withers 2020).

Collective food distribution and exchange networks enable food sovereignty by facilitating the sharing of kai, knowledge, skills, and resources (Balle and Watts 2022; Central Economic Development Agency 2023; Hutchings 2015). Māori-led exchange systems, including marae (Māori village)-based sharing and inter-hapū networks, are emphasised as particularly important for strengthening collective food sovereignty (Kawharu et al. 2022; McKerchar et al. 2015; Smith and Hutchings 2024).

Localism is also frequently discussed as an enabler of food sovereignty in Aotearoa, particularly where it is grounded in community control and culturally appropriate practices (Centre for Social Impact 2023; Hardy et al. 2024; Hutchings 2015; Hutchings and Smith 2020; Kore Hiakai 2024; Severinsen and Reweti 2024; Miller 2021; Richardson 2023; Wehi et al. 2023; Withers 2020). However, the literature cautions against equating local food with food sovereignty. Eberly (2023) argues that local food systems can reproduce existing inequalities if they fail to address structural, cultural, and economic conditions. Food sovereignty, therefore, depends not only on localism but also on who controls local food systems and whose values guide them (Eberly 2023; Hutchings 2015; Kore Hiakai 2024).

Importantly, within the context of Aotearoa, enabling food sovereignty is about decolonisation and enhancing Māori autonomy over food systems. As mentioned above, the literature consistently frames Māori sovereignty as foundational to food sovereignty in Aotearoa, positioning decolonisation as a necessary pathway towards food sovereign futures (Elers 2024; Kore Hiakai 2024; Shelling 2023). A persistent and critical issue identified in the literature is the marginalisation of Māori within food governance systems. Eurocentric planning approaches, for example, often override mana whenua aspirations, and Māori knowledge is subordinated in food policy frameworks (Harmsworth 2023; Hutchings et al. 2012; McKerchar et al. 2015). This exclusion exacerbates food inequities and undermines obligations to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Decolonising food systems involves disrupting colonial-capitalist food regimes, asserting tino rangatiratanga over food and whenua, and honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi within food governance (Burgess and Koroi 2024; Huambachano 2024; McKerchar et al. 2015; Oldham et al. 2024; Wright 2024). This includes enabling Māori control over ancestral land and food production (Huambachano 2020; Oldham et al. 2024; Withers 2020), embedding Māori values and governance within food systems (Harmsworth 2023; Hutchings et al. 2022; McKerchar et al. 2015), and resourcing kaupapa Māori initiatives through long-term and flexible funding arrangements (Hutchings et al. 2022). The literature also emphasises the importance of Māori–Crown relationships that support Māori-led decision-making and self-determined food pathways (Hutchings et al. 2022).

Enabling cohesion in the regulatory environment may be a first step in healing Māori–Crown relations in the food systems space. The regulatory environment in Aotearoa is widely described as misaligned with food sovereignty goals. Governance is fragmented, with no single ministry responsible for food systems, limiting coordination and the development of a coherent national strategy (Centre for Social Impact 2023). Regulatory gaps are particularly evident in urban contexts, where insufficient planning provisions for urban agriculture constrain food sovereignty practices among urban communities (Hanna and Wallace 2022).

Healing social inequalities is another major pathway to enabling food sovereignty in Aotearoa. The literature we reviewed identifies inequities in food access as a key constraint on food sovereignty (Bartos 2016; Eberly 2023; Hardy et al. 2024). Food poverty disproportionately affects Māori, Pacific peoples, single-parent households, and people with disabilities (Hardy et al. 2024; Hutchings et al. 2012; Kore Hiakai 2024). Such disparities are not framed as accidental, but as outcomes of institutional and structural systems that restrict access to kai, including colonial dispossession and systemic racism (Huambachano 2024; Kore Hiakai 2024). While social food organisations play an important role in mitigating food insecurity, the literature highlights significant constraints in these spaces including under-resourcing, reliance on volunteers, and limited reach (Hardy et al. 2024; Severinsen and Reweti 2024; Walters et al. 2021; Withers 2020). Charitable food aid models are also critiqued for providing short-term relief without addressing long-term food sovereignty (Kore Hiakai 2024).

Food sovereignty in Aotearoa is dependent on healing social relations. It is enabled through local, collective, and community-led food systems that prioritise self-determination and address structural, cultural and economic inequalities. Healing Māori-Crown relations is vitally important here. Decolonising food systems and upholding Te Tiriti of Waitangi within food governance will enable food sovereignty in Aotearoa. Finally, healing social inequalities related to food access and food poverty is another key pathway to implementing food sovereignty.

4.3 | Enabling Food Sovereignty in Place—Manawatū Insights

The Manawatū region reflects many of the structural challenges impacting food sovereignty across Aotearoa while also exhibiting place-specific constraints. Despite significant food production, approximately one-third of Palmerston North residents experience food insecurity through insufficient access to food (Manawatū Food Action Network 2021; Palmerston North City Council 2024).

Contributing factors include financial hardship, transportation barriers, limited access to food-growing spaces, and ongoing impacts of colonial land dispossession that disconnected mana whenua from mahinga kai (Elers 2024; Manawatū Food Action Network 2021; Severinsen and Reweti 2024). Housing insecurity is identified as a particularly significant constraint in the region, as rental arrangements often limit the ability of whānau to grow food, reinforcing dependence on external food systems (Manawatū Food Action Network 2021; Severinsen and Reweti 2024). Cultural erasure, including the loss of Māori place names, further undermines relational connections between people, place, and food (Elers 2024).

In the Manawatū region, food sovereignty is shaped by both material abundance and social-institutional conditions. The region produces significant quantities of food and has been described as the pātaka kai (food pantry) of the lower North Island as Manawatū Food Action Network (2021) discusses below;

Palmerston North is surrounded by an abundance of food from nga hau e wha [the surrounding area]. The rich vegetable growing soils of Horowhenua to the south, the Tasman Sea to the west serving up kai moana [sea food], the dairy producing paddocks of Taranaki to the north and the orchards and vineyards of Hawkes Bay and Wairapa to the East (p. 11).

The Manawatū region is considered a major lamb producing region and has a number of large food distribution centres that supply food across Aotearoa (Central Economic Development Agency 2023; Manawatū District Council 2017; Manawatū Food Action Network 2021).

Because of the decolonial nature of food sovereignty in Aotearoa, mana whenua play a vital role for enabling it within the Manawatū region. Local governments in Manawatū work alongside groups of mana whenua to develop food sovereignty strategies. Palmerston North City Council's draft Food

Security and Resilience Policy, for example, commits to equitable access, sustainability, and partnership with Rangitāne o Manawatū (one of the Māori groups with territorial authority in the Manawatū district) (Palmerston North City Council 2024). The Manawatū Regional Food Strategy developed by the Central Economic Development Agency, a local government entity in Manawatū, acknowledges hapū and iwi leadership and signals intent to develop a Māori-specific food strategy led by Māori, for Māori (Central Economic Development Agency 2023). Community-led governance initiatives, such as the 4412 Kai resilience strategy developed by Ora Konnect, a collaboration of Māori health providers, mana whenua, and other community-based groups in the Manawatū region, further demonstrate how food sovereignty is pursued through collective, place-based coordination in the area (Manawatū Food Action Network 2021).

The aspirations of local tangata whenua are vital for shaping food sovereignty in Manawatū. Raukawa Charitable Trust, who represent the financial interests of a specific group of mana whenua in the region, articulate aspirations for abundant access to traditional kai, marae-based māra kai (food gardens), Māori-led food production and exchange networks, and food waste practices that restore relationships with Papatūānuku (earth mother) (Raukawa Charitable Trust 2015). Raukawa Charitable Trust has written the Te Rautaki Taiao a Raukawa—the Raukawa Environmental Management Plan. This plan outlines specific mana whenua aspirations for environmental restoration and food sovereignty in the Manawatū region, positioning food as central to cultural continuity and ecological health (Raukawa Charitable Trust 2015).

The challenges discussed above demonstrate that food sovereignty in Aotearoa is constrained by enduring structural conditions shaping relationships between land, governance, economy, and wellbeing. In synthesising the literature, we found that enabling food sovereignty ultimately requires healing relationalities across two interconnected dimensions: people-environment relations and social relations. Healing people-environment relations, while prioritising place-based tangata whenua connections, can restore te taiao, reinvigorate mahinga kai, and contribute to more abundant and resilient food systems, reducing reliance on dominant global food systems. Healing social relations, particularly between tangata whenua and the Crown, can support the decolonisation of food systems, strengthen collective and community-based food initiatives, improve equitable access to kai and further enable food sovereignty.

5 | Conclusions

This paper has presented a kaupapa Māori rapid review of food sovereignty scholarship in Aotearoa, offering a critical geographical synthesis that centres Māori food sovereignty, relational ontologies, and place-based dynamics. Drawing together Indigenous scholarship, critical public health, and social geography, the review demonstrates that food sovereignty in Aotearoa cannot be understood as a technical or sectoral issue, nor as a universal framework applied uniformly across contexts. Instead, it is a relational and political project shaped by

whakapapa, colonial histories, and ongoing struggles over land, governance, and authority.

Across the literature, food sovereignty emerges as both restorative and resistant: restoring relationships between people, kai, and te taiao while actively contesting colonial-capitalist food systems that commodify land, labour, and food. Indigenous food sovereignty is shown to be inherently relational, place-based, and multitemporal, grounded in responsibilities to past and future generations as well as to non-human relations. In Aotearoa, these characteristics are articulated through te ao Māori (the Māori world), where whakapapa positions food not as a resource, but as a relation embedded within complex social, ecological, and spiritual networks.

The review highlights that food sovereignty is enabled not through isolated interventions, but through interconnected relationships between whenua, kai, governance, political economy, and place. Equally, the gaps and challenges identified reveal that constraints on food sovereignty are structural and relational, rooted in colonial land dispossession, dominant capitalist food regimes, environmental degradation, inequitable food access, and fragmented governance. These constraints undermine Indigenous authority and collective food systems, limiting the transformative potential of food sovereignty initiatives.

The Manawatū context illustrates both the possibilities and limits of food sovereignty in practice. Despite significant food production, the region exhibits deep food insecurity alongside strong mana whenua aspirations for food sovereignty. This paradox underscores the need to move beyond abundance-focused narratives and attend instead to governance, access, and the relational connections between people, place, and food.

This paper makes two key arguments. The first, discussed in Part One, is that separating food sovereignty from Māori food sovereignty in Aotearoa is analytically unhelpful. Commitments made through Te Tiriti o Waitangi establish sovereignty as relational and position Māori sovereignty as foundational to any claims of food sovereignty or food security for all. Food sovereignty in the Aotearoa context is therefore inherently decolonial, contingent upon tino rangatiratanga and the restoration of Māori authority over mahinga kai. This challenges approaches that frame food sovereignty as a matter of local food production or resilience without addressing the colonial structures that continue to shape food systems.

The second central argument of this paper, outlined in Part Two, is that enabling food sovereignty in Aotearoa is ultimately about healing relationalities across two distinct but inter-related dimensions: social relations and people-environment relations. Healing reciprocal relations between people and the environment can work to restore just and abundant mahinga kai and further reduce our reliance on global food systems.

This paper contributes to geographical scholarship in three key ways. First, it synthesises contemporary food sovereignty literature in Aotearoa through an explicitly Indigenous and relational framework, centring Māori perspectives. Second, it

reframes commonly cited indicators and enablers of food sovereignty as relational dimensions that emerge through interconnected environmental and social relationships, rather than as discrete or technical factors. Third, by grounding the analysis in the Manawatū region, the paper offers a place-based account of how food sovereignty is imagined and enacted in practice, revealing both the possibilities generated through local relationships and the structural constraints that continue to shape food systems in place.

Taken together, this review and the key conclusions drawn contribute to geographical debates on sovereignty, political ecology, and Indigenous self-determination by demonstrating that food sovereignty in Aotearoa is fundamentally about relationships: relationships to land, to food, to governance, and to each other. For geographers, the paper highlights the importance of centring Indigenous epistemologies and place-based analysis in food systems research. For policymakers and practitioners, it underscores the need to move beyond technocratic solutions towards decolonial, Te Tiriti o Waitangi-grounded approaches that enable Māori-led food sovereignty as a foundation for just and sustainable food futures. Future research would benefit from further Māori-led, place-based analyses that attend to scale, governance, and relational accountability across diverse regional contexts.

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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