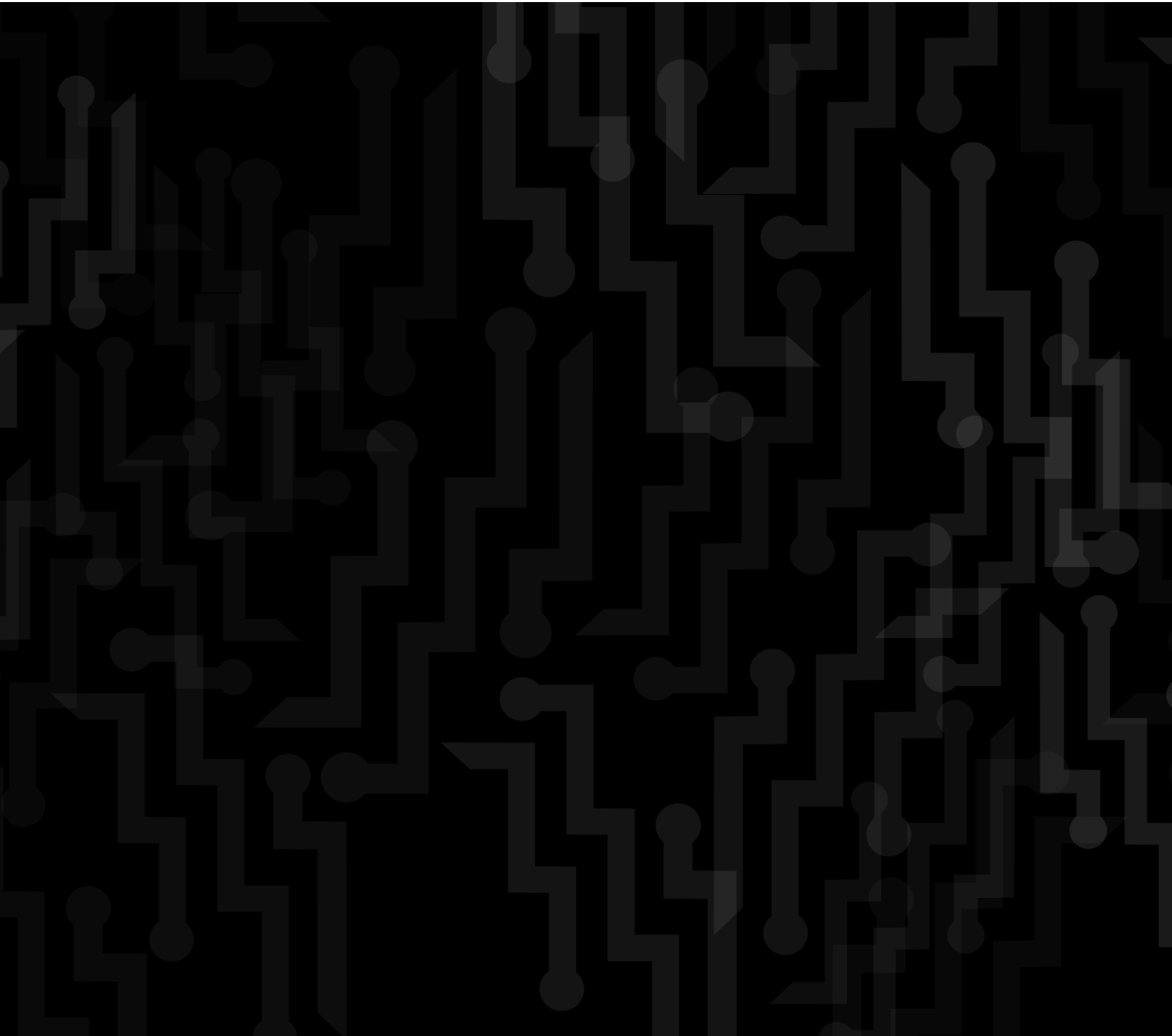


**He aha te utu mo te kai?
Exploring the economic benefits
of kai sovereignty**

by

Anahera Whaanga-Smith



A Research Paper completed as part of the Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga Raumati Internship Programme 2025-26 and as part of a project titled 'He utu mō te kai: Exploring the economic benefits of kai sovereignty'. The internship was supervised Dr Ken Taiapa and funded by the Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga 2025-26 Internship Grant.

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He aha te utu mo te kai?

Exploring the economic benefits of kai sovereignty

Nā Anahera Whaanga-Smith

Mihimihi

Ko Whetumatarau me Moumoukai nga maunga tu te po tu te ao
Ka nga wai o oku awa ko Awatere me Waitirohia e tere nei e au mihi nei
Utaina toia ra aku waka ko Horouta me Takitimu I u mai ki tenei whenua taurikura
Kia tu ai ko aku whare ko Hinerupe me Kahungunu e tu tonu nei
E hora atu nei i te aroha o aku marae ko Hinerupe me Kahungunu ki te tai whakarunga ki te
tai whakararo
Tenei a Ngati Porou me Ngati Kahungunu aku iwi e mihi nei
Ko Anahera Whaanga-Smith toku ingoa

I would like to mihi to Ngā Pae o Te Māramatanga, for providing me with the platform and opportunity to learn and develop as an aspiring researcher. A big mihi to my supervisors, Dr Ken Taiapa and Dr Christina McKerchar, for seeing the potential in me to contribute to this mahi and providing me with this opportunity to learn, develop, and contribute to a project close to home. A huge thank you to Dr Summer Wright and Els Russell for supporting me throughout the internship, week after week. Despite the internship being conducted virtually and lacking a kanohi-ki-te-kanohi aspect, I have felt your support and guidance throughout the entire process – Tēnei te mihi ki a kōrua. Thank you to my whānau for supporting me throughout this time and to everyone who has supported me along the way. I am incredibly grateful and have every intention of bringing all that I have learnt into my master's thesis this year, and into all future research I aspire to conduct.

Mai i te kōpae ki te urupa, tātou ako tonu ai

From the cradle to the grave, we are forever learning

Executive Summary

This rapid review examines the economic benefits of kai sovereignty initiatives in Aotearoa, as underpinned by Kaupapa Māori theory and guided by Kaupapa Māori methodology. The review aimed to *document and describe the ways in which kai sovereignty initiatives produce economic benefits through improving whānau equity and access to healthy kai.*

Kaupapa Māori theory and methodology were employed and imperative throughout all phases of the review. Rapid review methodology was utilised in the inclusion, collection, screening, synthesis, and analysis of literature. Thematic analysis was employed to group data into core themes, as underpinned by kaupapa Māori principles.

This analysis was informed by 11 articles, and three core themes were formulated from this data: 1) Cyclic Māori economies; 2) Planning seven generations ahead; 3) Cultural identity and connection to te ao Māori. Economic benefits were explored through a te ao Māori lens, with the utilisation of the Inclusive Wealth Framework and the four forms of capital (Schulze et al., 2024).

Analysis of the literature highlighted that kai sovereignty initiatives in Aotearoa generate secondary economic benefits across cultural, natural, produced, and human capital. The literature provided insight into the economic benefits of kai sovereignty initiatives at temporal and local scales; however, evidence was limited at regional and national scales. Self-sufficiency, sustainability, mātauranga and tino rangatiratanga were highlighted as essential factors in how kai sovereignty initiatives produce economic benefit.

Several knowledge gaps emerged from this rapid review and its findings, which inform the review's core recommendations. It is recommended that:

- Additional research should be conducted on the economic benefits of kai sovereignty initiatives, given the limited literature available.
- Further research should be conducted to examine how the economic benefits of kai sovereignty initiatives function at regional and national geographic scales.
- Further research should examine what types of policy and systemic action would best support Māori kai sovereignty initiatives for and with tangata whenua in Aotearoa.

This review has supported understanding of the economic benefits generated by kai sovereignty initiatives, how they operate at geographic and temporal scales, and how they operate through the four holistic capitals (Schulze et al., 2024). The recommendations outlined were informed by and work off the findings from this review to further support kai sovereignty, kai sovereignty initiatives and Māori health and wellbeing across time.

Goal of Internship

The goal of this internship was to effectively contribute to the project of *He aha te utu mō te kai? Exploring the economic benefits of kai sovereignty*. This project aims to examine and analyse how literature may further support understanding of kai sovereignty initiatives, specifically how they produce economic benefits, exploring this through a te ao Māori lens and with whānau equity and access to healthy kai at the forefront. Additionally, my goal as an intern was to learn how to conduct a rapid review, develop as an aspiring researcher, and in some way support my whānau in Te Tairāwhiti alongside other Māori whānau and communities across Aotearoa.

Introduction

Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua

I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past

This whakataukī draws attention to perceptions of time within te ao Māori, and of the past, present and future as ever-interconnected (Rameka, 2016). In drawing on this whakataukī to inform the future and this review, we must first look to our past. The signing of the Treaty of Waitangi and Te Tiriti o Waitangi in 1840 marked the formal establishment of a relationship between signatory hapū and iwi, and the British Crown Government (the Crown) in Aotearoa (Orange, 2011). Since 1840, tangata whenua have experienced a plethora of challenges; despite being the founding document of Aotearoa, Te Tiriti o Waitangi is still not fully honoured nor upheld throughout Aotearoa (Oldham et al., 2024; Waitangi Tribunal, 2023). This is because, looking towards the past, colonising processes are a continuous and dominant feature of the past and the present (Reid et al., 2019; Smith, 2006). Pre-colonisation in Aotearoa, with the whenua as the foundation for collective sustenance and wellbeing, kai systems were reciprocal and sustainable, and the wellbeing of Māori communities reflected this, and hence, flourished. (McKerchar et al., 2014; Pihama et al., 2023; Wham et al., 2012). Whenua continues to be the very foundation for collective Māori wellbeing (Pihama et al., 2023); however, colonisation, land loss, displacement, economic coercion, and the countless breaches to Te Tiriti o Waitangi by the Crown have deeply harmed Māori communities and fractured relationships with the whenua and with kai (Oldham et al., 2024; Pihama et al., 2023; Taiapa & Moekawa Barnes, 2023). Despite this, tangata whenua across Aotearoa remain resilient in efforts to reclaim mana motuhake, tino rangatiratanga and reconnection to whenua in an effort to uphold the mana of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Pihama et al., 2023).

Māori kai sovereignty is a rapidly growing priority across Māori collectives in Aotearoa and is the focus of this review (Oldham et al., 2024). Whenua is the foundation for collective sustenance, and therefore, the basis of kai sovereignty, as whenua and kai are inseparable (McKerchar et al., 2014; Oldham et al., 2024; Pihama et al., 2023). Māori kai sovereignty returns control of food to the hands and lands of tangata whenua (Moeke-Pickering et al., 2015). Additionally, according to Oldham et al. (2024, p. 8),

In Aotearoa, the country's particular land histories and relations indicate that any movement for food sovereignty must engage with the fact that much of the land in question has been unjustly taken from Māori and therefore must centre tangata whenua and kaupapa Māori movements to reclaim mana Motuhake and rangatiratanga.

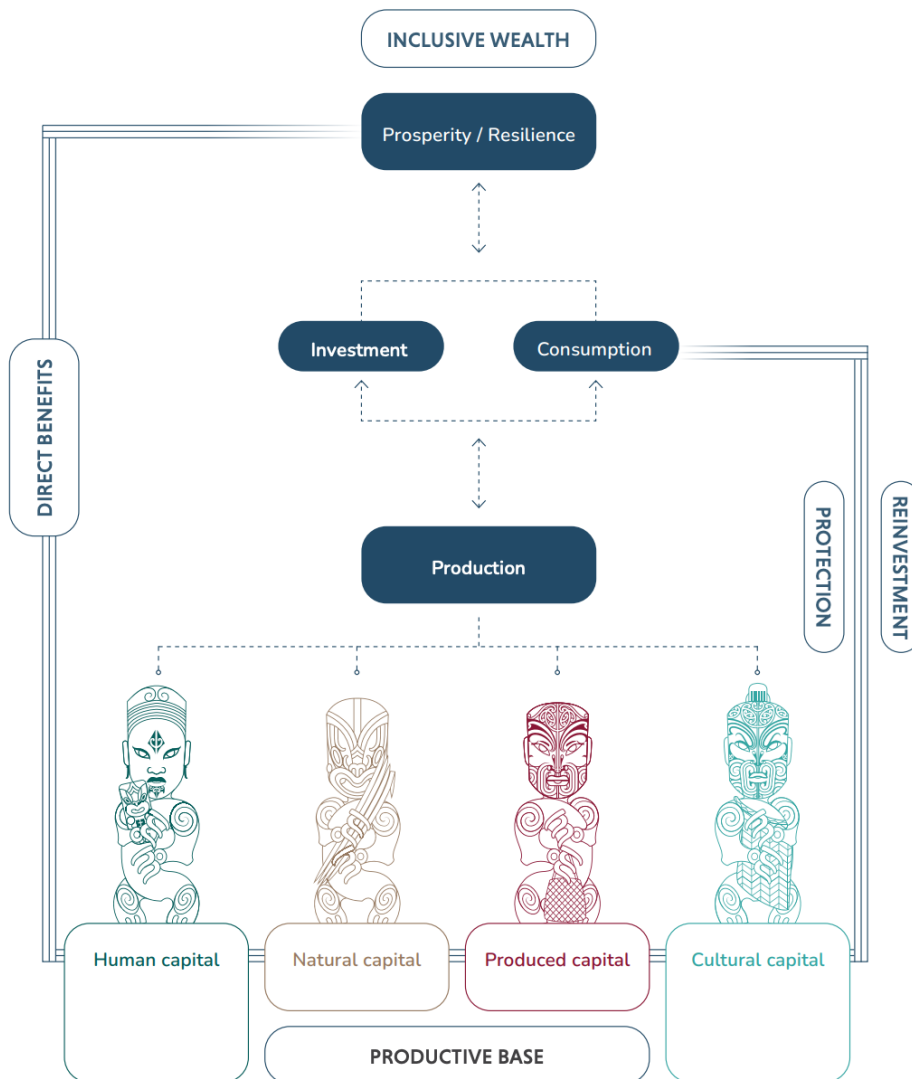
Māori kai sovereignty supports Māori communities in reclaiming traditional kai practices, the transmission of mātauranga, and the improvement of hauora Māori through connection and reconnection to whenua (Moeke-Pickering et al., 2015). There is a steady growth of kai sovereignty initiatives throughout Aotearoa that draw on the connections between whenua, kai, identity, and wellbeing, and provide holistic outcomes for tangata whenua, as determined by themselves and what is best for their community (Elers, 2024; Taiapa & Moekawa Barnes, 2023). However, less is known in the literature about the economic benefits of kai sovereignty initiatives, particularly from a kaupapa Māori perspective.

The economy guides the formation, allocation and consumption of goods and services at global, national, regional, and local scales. (Altman, 2009; Amoamo et al., 2018; Schulze et al., 2024). The New Zealand economy is founded on neoliberal ideals and capitalist processes (Amoamo

et al., 2018), such as achieving maximum financial gain, productivity, and utility (Rout et al., 2025). This, however, does not consider Māori worldviews, values or focal points. Rout et al. (2025) highlight that the Māori economy and Māori economies across Aotearoa are guided by several kaupapa and are: reciprocal, embedded, empathetic, collective, balanced, and local. This is essentially the opposite of the capitalist lens through which the New Zealand economy is viewed, approached, and constructed (Rout et al., 2025). When speaking to economic benefits, within te ao Māori and within Māori economies, we cannot reduce this to singular, profit-based or monetary values (Amoamo et al., 2018; Rout et al., 2025). According to Rout et al. (2025), the economic objectives of Māori economies surround health and wellbeing, not financial gain, and that the economy exists to serve the people and the whenua for future generations, rather than the other way round. The Māori economy is continuously transforming and developing, and alongside it, so too are the economic benefits for tangata whenua (Schulze et al., 2024).

The Inclusive Wealth Framework developed by Schulze et al. (2024) takes an interconnected and comprehensive approach. The framework was developed and utilised within Te Ōhanga Māori – The Māori Economy Report 2023. These reports support Māori development and wellbeing, are grounded in te ao Māori and align with the kaupapa that guide Māori economies (Schulze et al., 2024). The framework highlights four capitals (or economic benefits), including not only produced capital but also human, natural, and cultural capital (Schulze et al., 2024). Hence, the framework expands beyond capitalist economic models that favour physical and financial capital (Schulze et al., 2024). Through these four capitals, or pou, multiple pathways for income, wellbeing outcomes, and economic values are generated for and by tangata whenua. This model will be drawn upon to frame the discussion surrounding economic benefits reflecting an interconnected te ao Māori approach.

Figure 1: The Inclusive Wealth Framework (Schulze et al, 2024, p. 4)



Aims and Objectives

This rapid review aims to *document and describe the ways in which kai sovereignty initiatives produce economic benefits through improving whānau equity and access to healthy kai*. The aim of the review will be supported through three research questions:

1. What are the economic benefits produced by kai sovereignty initiatives?
2. How do the economic benefits produced by kai sovereignty initiatives operate across local, regional and national scales?

3. What are the key factors that influence how kai sovereignty initiatives in Aotearoa produce economic benefits?

When viewed through a capitalist lens, kai sovereignty initiatives often exist outside of the realm of generating economic benefit. By exploring these questions through a te ao Māori lens and kaupapa Māori foundation, this review seeks to contribute to understanding and shed light on the economic benefits produced by kai sovereignty initiatives in Aotearoa.

Methods

Kaupapa Māori methodology

This rapid review aims to *document and describe the ways in which kai sovereignty initiatives produce economic benefits through improving whānau equity and access to healthy kai*, the focus population of which this research aims to support are tangata whenua; therefore without question it was imperative that this review was underpinned by kaupapa Māori theory (Eketone, 2008; Smith, 2017; Smith, 2015). Kaupapa Māori theory supports resistance against homogenising Western notions and ideals, places te ao Māori at the centre, supports Māori development and tino rangatiratanga, and supports Māori to flourish as Māori (Eketone, 2008; Hoskins & Jones, 2017; Pihama et al., 2002; Smith, 2017). Working within a kaupapa Māori paradigm was pivotal to capturing and supporting Māori voices, perspectives, experiences, and aspirations; hence, the selection of literature that informs this review was given the utmost priority. Inclusion criteria included only literature that was Māori-led, kaupapa Māori, and designed alongside Māori (Wilson et al., 2021). Furthermore, kaupapa Māori methodology guided this review through ensuring a by Māori, for Māori and with Māori approach (Eketone, 2008; Smith, 2015). Māori concepts and constructs were upheld throughout all phases of this review, particularly in the analysis and sense-making phases (Cram, 2017; Hiha, 2015). Overall, kaupapa Māori is essential to this review and provides the conceptual and

analytical lens and worldview through which this research is approached, conducted and understood.

Rapid Review

Given the project timeline, the research team behind this review collectively decided that a rapid review was the preferred method due to its ability to provide timely, transparent, replicable, systematic, and in-depth insight into the review aim (Devane et al., 2024; Garritty et al., 2024). The review followed the steps outlined by Devane et al. (2024), which included:

1. Comprehensive literature search: Research objectives and resulting search strategies were designed, tested and formatted. This informed the search for relevant peer-reviewed and grey literature on the economic benefits of kai sovereignty initiatives, conducted across four electronic databases.
2. Study selection: A single reviewer screened literature against the eligibility criteria at the title and abstract, and full-text screening phases, with a second reviewer conducting spot checks to ensure consistency and methodological rigour (Devane et al., 2024).
3. Data extraction: With the use of the Data Collection Instrument (DCI), a single reviewer characterised and extracted relevant data from included literature.
4. Synthesis methods: Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse and group data into core themes, with the assistance of the DCI.

Eligibility criteria

A modified SPICE framework (Booth, 2006) was utilised to construct clear review objectives and questions. The SPICE framework was adjusted by removing its comparison component to align with the nature of the review (Booth, 2006). The modified SPICE framework consists of

setting, perspective, intervention, and evaluation, as depicted in Table 1; it also encompasses the ‘where’, ‘for whom’, ‘the what’, and ‘with what result?’ (Booth, 2006).

Table 1: Question framework using the modified SPICE framework

S	Setting	Aotearoa, New Zealand
P	Perspective	Māori
I	Intervention	Kai sovereignty initiatives
C	Comparison	No comparison
E	Evaluation	Economic benefits

The modified SPICE framework framed the eligibility criteria for the review. As this review is specific to Aotearoa, literature was eligible only if it was focused on or located in Aotearoa. It was a requirement that literature reflect or support Māori perspectives, and hence studies that were Māori-led, kaupapa Māori, or co-designed with Māori were eligible for inclusion, to support Māori voice, worldviews, and tino rangatiratanga (Pihama, 2010). Literature also needed to outline a kai sovereignty initiative or intervention and display evidence of economic benefit, as conceptualised from a te ao Māori perspective, as outlined in the introduction. Additionally, literature published prior to 2010 was excluded to maintain contemporary relevance (Grant & Booth, 2009). The studies included in the review were peer-reviewed scholarly articles and grey literature relevant to the review's aim (Garritty et al., 2024). Grey literature was considered for eligibility on a case-by-case basis during the screening process to limit publication bias.

Search Strategy

The modified SPICE framework also supported the development of a tight search strategy for this review (Booth, 2006). To support a systematic approach, a range of electronic databases were selected, with each strategically chosen based upon their likelihood of generating relevant literature (Garritty et al., 2024). The electronic databases searched included Google Scholar, Scopus, InformIT and Web of Science. The search across databases consisted of the following keywords or combination of keywords: ‘*M*ori*’ OR ‘*Tangata Whenua*’ AND ‘*Food Sovereignty*’ OR ‘*Kai Sovereignty*’ OR ‘*Māra kai*’ OR ‘*Mahinga kai*’ OR ‘*Food system*’ AND ‘*Econom**’ OR ‘*Economic benefit**’. This search string was adapted to suit the requirements of each database. For the final search strategies, refer to APPENDIX A.

The search results were screened by one researcher, firstly by title and abstract. Upon completion of title and abstract screening, eligible articles were screened for full-text eligibility. Throughout both screening phases, spot checks were conducted by another Māori researcher to ensure the protocol was applied consistently (Devane et al., 2024). Once screened, eligible articles were charted in Excel using the DCI. The DCI allowed for methodological analysis, characterisation of the included literature, ensured adherence to the eligibility criteria, and supported minimising bias (Zaza et al., 2000). Charting with the assistance of the DCI, focused on the key perspectives, methods, and economic benefits across local, regional, and national scales for each article, and categorised this data into core themes.

Thematic analysis

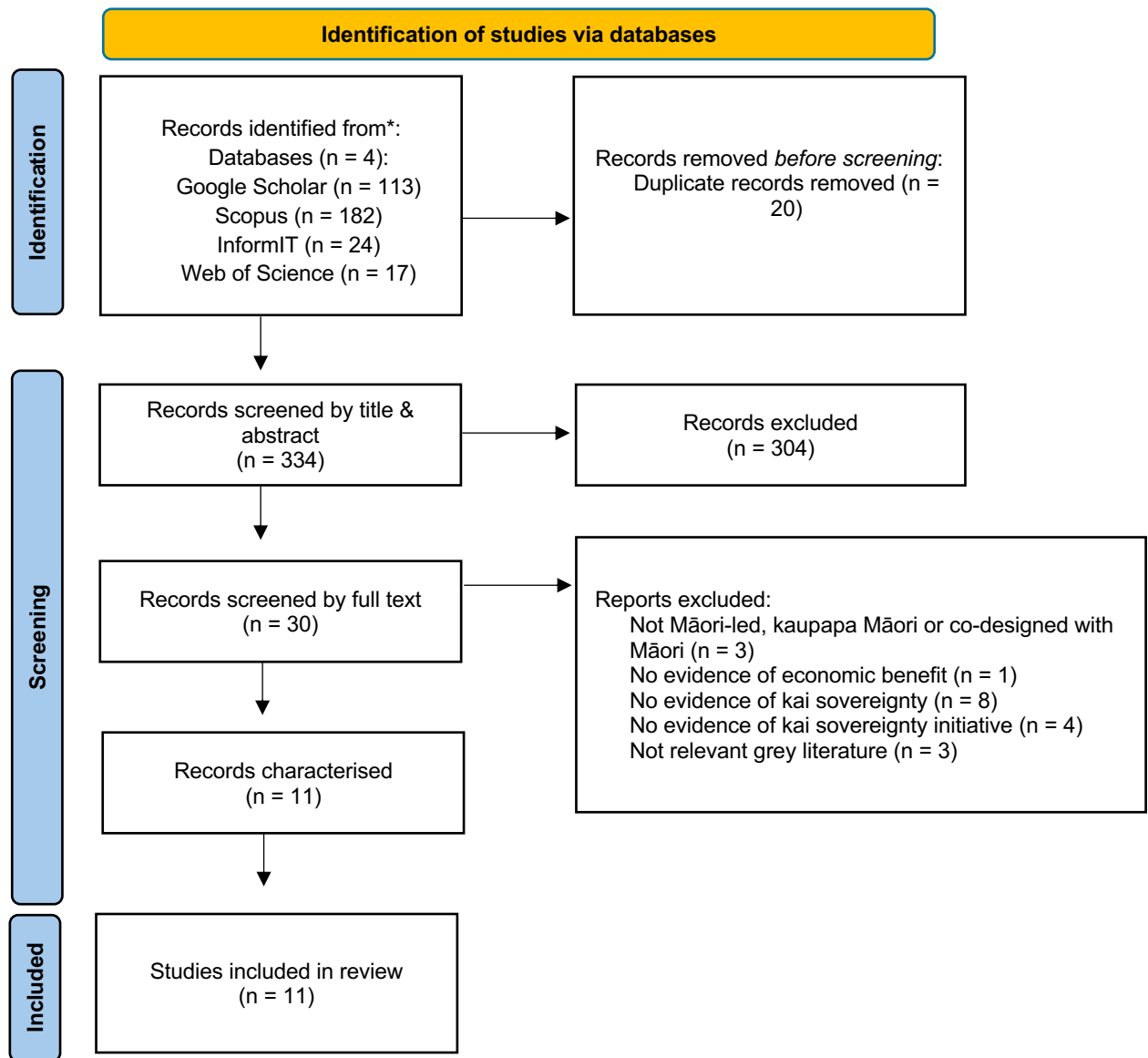
Thematic analysis identifies and groups consistent and recurring patterns across data into themes (Terry et al., 2017; Whaanga, 2020). Thematic analysis has been utilised in this review to categorise the data collected from the included articles into core themes (Stefanon et al.,

2023). The DCI supported this process, enabling characterisation to be completed in conjunction with and in support of the identification and formation of relevant themes across data, and provide an in-depth analysis of the included literature. This review was underpinned by Kaupapa Māori methodology (Pihama, 2010; Pihama et al., 2002). The theoretical flexibility that thematic analysis provides aligns with a kaupapa Māori paradigm which is fluid and adaptable (Haitana et al., 2020; Mead, 2016; Terry et al., 2017). Researchers noted the complexity of categorising data into themes, given that te ao Māori and all it encompasses is inherently holistic and interwoven (Mead, 2016); therefore, they acknowledge the ever-apparent links between themes when centring Māori perspectives.

Results

As illustrated in Figure 1, the initial searches yielded 354 results, 131 of which were sourced from Google Scholar, 24 from InformIT, 182 from Scopus and 17 from Web of Science. Duplicates were removed manually, resulting in 334 articles, which were then screened by title and abstract against the eligibility criteria. At the completion of title and abstract screening, 30 articles met the eligibility criteria and were passed to full-text screening. At full-text screening, and upon further in-depth evaluation of each article against the eligibility criteria, 19 articles were excluded. Of these excluded articles, three were not Māori led, kaupapa Māori, or codesigned with Māori, eight articles did not demonstrate evidence or focus on kai sovereignty, four did not present evidence of a kai sovereignty initiative; one article did not demonstrate evidence of economic benefit and three documents were excluded because they were grants and deemed unreliable grey literature. Following duplicate removal, title and abstract screening, and full text screening, 11 documents were charted, analysed and included in the review.

Figure 2: PRISMA Chart of Peer-reviewed and Grey Literature Searches



Study characteristics

Geographic location

In accordance with the eligibility criteria, all articles focused on Aotearoa. However, within Aotearoa, the location of each study and the associated kai sovereignty initiatives varied. Five articles and associated kai sovereignty initiatives were solely based in Te Ika-a-Māui (Elers, 2024; Leigh et al., 2025; Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022), and two articles and associated

kai sovereignty initiatives based in Te Waipounamu (Savage et al., 2017; Tremane et al., 2018). Of the remaining four articles, two presented kai sovereignty initiatives in both Te Ika-a-Māui and Te Waipounamu (Hutchings et al., 2020; Stein et al., 2018); of which initiatives based in Te Ika-a-Māui featured more predominantly. The final two articles were not bound to a specific location in Aotearoa (FitzHerbert, 2021; Smith & Hutchings, 2024).

Kai sovereignty initiative

The articles included in this review explored a broad spectrum of kai sovereignty initiatives. Four articles solely focused on māra kai or community gardens (Elers, 2024; Hond et al., 2019; Leigh et al., 2025; Stein et al., 2018), with some detailing multiple māra kai initiatives (Hond et al., 2019; Stein et al., 2018). Two articles solely outlined online or internet-based kai sovereignty platforms (FitzHerbert, 2021; Tremane et al., 2018). Three articles focussed on agribusiness and enterprise development initiatives (Hutchings et al., 2020; Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022). Of these, two articles also outlined the same digital kai sovereignty platform (Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022), and one article provided an overview of over 20 kai sovereignty initiatives (Savage et al., 2017).

All four articles solely outlining māra kai or community gardens were located in Te Ika-a-Māui (Elers, 2024; Hond et al., 2019; Leigh et al., 2025; Stein et al., 2018), with only one of these articles also outlining a māra kai initiative in Te Waipounamu (Stein et al., 2018). In contrast, the article detailing over 20 kai sovereignty initiatives, including māra kai, was set in Te Waipounamu (Savage et al., 2017). Of the two articles solely outlining internet-based platforms, one was based in Te Waipounamu (Tremane et al., 2018) and the other was not linked to a specific location in Aotearoa (FitzHerbert, 2021). Finally, the three agribusiness and enterprise development initiatives were all based in Te Ika-a-Māui (Hutchings et al., 2020;

Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022), with one also outlining part of the initiative in Te Waipounamu (Hutchings et al., 2020).

Focus of the articles: Economic benefit

The DCI highlighted varying levels of emphasis on economic benefit across the 11 included articles, with each article placed into one of five categories based on its emphasis: High, high-moderate, moderate, moderate-low, or low. Five articles were categorised as high emphasis, due to their strong focus on economic benefits (FitzHerbert, 2021; Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022; Savage et al., 2017; Tremane et al., 2018). One article was categorised as high-moderate (Hutchings et al., 2020), while two were classified as moderate (Hond et al., 2019; Stein et al., 2018). Three articles demonstrated moderate-low emphasis (Elers, 2024; Leigh et al., 2025; Smith & Hutchings, 2024). Notably, despite a low level of focus on economic benefits being a category, no articles fell into this classification.

Economic scale

Articles were also analysed in terms of economic benefits across local, regional, and national scales or geographic scopes in Aotearoa. Local economic benefits refer to the economic benefits that occur within a city, town, or community in Aotearoa. In contrast, regional economic benefits refer to a larger area, e.g., multiple towns, communities, cities, or regions in Aotearoa. National benefits refer to the economic benefits for Aotearoa as a whole. There was a strong focus on local economic benefit for specific communities and whānau, with all articles demonstrating local economic benefit (Elers, 2024; FitzHerbert, 2021; Hond et al., 2019; Hutchings et al., 2020; Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022; Leigh et al., 2025; Savage et al., 2017; Smith & Hutchings, 2024; Stein et al., 2018; Tremane et al., 2018). Three articles provided insight into regional economic benefit (FitzHerbert, 2021; Smith & Hutchings, 2024;

Tremane et al., 2018), and four presented evidence of national economic benefit for their associated kai sovereignty initiative (FitzHerbert, 2021; Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022; Tremane et al., 2018), however, two articles outline the same kai sovereignty initiative (Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022).

Themes

Through the characterisation of included articles and the use of the DCI, three main themes were constructed during analysis for this review. These are: 1) Cyclic Māori Economies; 2) Planning seven generations ahead; 3) Cultural identity and connection to te ao Māori. Thematic analysis assisted in further characterising the articles and associated kai sovereignty initiatives by highlighting the economic benefits they produce, how they operate across local, regional, and national scales, and the factors that influence how they produce those benefits.

Theme 1: Cyclic Māori economies

The term ‘Cyclic economy’ refers to local Māori economies as circular and holistic, a continuous feedback loop between tangata, within communities, and whenua through whakapapa (Kawharu et al., 2022; Kawharu, Tapsell, et al., 2022). Kai sovereignty initiatives support cyclic Māori economies, giving back to its community and generating economic opportunities for tangata whilst ensuring the health of the whenua (Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022). All included articles bar one informed this theme (Elers, 2024; FitzHerbert, 2021; Hond et al., 2019; Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022; Leigh et al., 2025; Savage et al., 2017; Smith & Hutchings, 2024; Stein et al., 2018; Tremane et al., 2018).

Theme 2: Planning seven generations ahead

Māori worldviews do not align with short-term profit-focused outcomes, but rather long-term outcomes that not only serve the whenua and people of the past, but also future generations; instead of planning only for the now, kept in foresight is the next seven generations of descendants (Amoamo et al., 2018; Rout et al., 2025). Almost all of the literature and associated kai sovereignty initiatives included in this review displayed evidence of long-term, sustainable and intergenerational benefits for Māori and the whenua (Elers, 2024; Hond et al., 2019; Hutchings et al., 2020; Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022; Leigh et al., 2025; Savage et al., 2017; Smith & Hutchings, 2024; Tremane et al., 2018). Exactly how these benefits translate into economic benefits is explored within this theme.

Theme 3: Cultural identity and connection to te ao Māori

The final theme of cultural identity and connection to te ao Māori expands beyond Western notions of ‘economic benefit’ by highlighting the cultural benefits that coexist with, or double as, economic benefits. All articles informing this review presented evidence of this theme (Elers, 2024; FitzHerbert, 2021; Hond et al., 2019; Hutchings et al., 2020; Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022; Leigh et al., 2025; Savage et al., 2017; Smith & Hutchings, 2024; Stein et al., 2018; Tremane et al., 2018). This theme explores how kai sovereignty initiatives foster cultural capital and how this translates into economic benefits, as supported by the included literature.

Discussion

In the structure of this discussion, each research objective, theme and capital will collectively contribute to a broader, holistic, and in-depth understanding of the review aim, which is to *document and describe the ways in which kai sovereignty initiatives produce economic benefits*

through improving whānau equity and access to healthy kai. The discussion is structured to align with the review's research objectives, and themes will be discussed and interwoven throughout. The Inclusive Wealth Framework developed by Schulze et al. (2024) and the four forms of capital will assist in the discussion, in which the economic benefits of kai sovereignty initiatives will be framed as a distinct form of capital.

Research Objective 1: What are the economic benefits produced by kai sovereignty initiatives?

Kai sovereignty is a collective and tikanga-focused activity and is aligned with increasing access and control over healthy kai and promoting whānau equity, alongside other forms of economic benefits (Elers, 2024; Hond et al., 2019; Leigh et al., 2025; Smith & Hutchings, 2024; Stein et al., 2018). Although this review speaks to the economic benefits and capital of kai sovereignty initiatives, it is important to acknowledge that economic benefits are often not the primary focus; instead, they emerge as secondary effects (Elers, 2024; Hond et al., 2019; Leigh et al., 2025; Smith & Hutchings, 2024; Stein et al., 2018). Therefore, through supporting access and control over healthy kai, promoting whānau equity, and connection to te ao Māori, economic benefits are produced. Framing and utilising the Inclusive Wealth Framework will further support discussion.

Human Capital

Human capital refers to the skills, capabilities, experiences and knowledge possessed by individuals, whānau and communities (Schulze et al., 2024), which are essential to the growth of flourishing *cyclic Māori economies* (David, 2000; Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022). Upskilling is an outcome of many of the kai sovereignty initiatives discussed in this review (FitzHerbert, 2021; Hutchings et al., 2020; Leigh et al., 2025; Savage et al., 2017; Stein et al.,

2018), with many providing individuals, whānau and local communities with training or opportunities for personal and professional growth (Hutchings et al., 2020; Schulze et al., 2024). Education plays an integral role in skill development, which is facilitated through kai sovereignty initiatives and presented in many forms, including the transmission of mātauranga Māori and ways to grow or access healthy kai long-term (Hutchings et al., 2020; Stein et al., 2018).

In terms of tangible human capital, and as reflected in *theme 2*, intergenerational health and wellbeing of Māori individuals, whānau and collectives were central to the kai sovereignty initiatives outlined in this review (David, 2000; Elers, 2024; Hond et al., 2019; Hutchings et al., 2020; Leigh et al., 2025; Savage et al., 2017; Smith & Hutchings, 2024; Stein et al., 2018; Tremane et al., 2018). The holistic health and wellbeing of whānau were supported and upheld through access to healthy kai and improved nutrition for whānau and their tamariki (Elers, 2024; Hond et al., 2019; Leigh et al., 2025; Stein et al., 2018), reduced stress levels and anxiety, and associated mental illness (Leigh et al., 2025), and the strengthening of cultural identity through traditional practices and connection (Elers, 2024; Hond et al., 2019; Hutchings et al., 2020; Kawharu, 2019; Leigh et al., 2025; Savage et al., 2017; Tremane et al., 2018). Elers (2024) highlighted that the pathway to supporting Māori health and equitable health outcomes for whānau through māra kai is through the reclamation of whenua and mahinga kai practices. Kai sovereignty initiatives contribute to improved health and wellbeing outcomes for Māori (David, 2000; Elers, 2024; Hond et al., 2019; Hutchings et al., 2020; Leigh et al., 2025; Savage et al., 2017; Smith & Hutchings, 2024; Stein et al., 2018; Tremane et al., 2018), specifically nutrition-related diseases or health outcomes for which Māori experience a significant health burden (McKerchar et al., 2024). This presents an economic benefit and opportunity: the health and wellbeing of whānau and the whenua are improved through kai sovereignty initiatives, not only for the present but, just as importantly, for future generations, as evident in *theme 2*. It

also generates public health and economic benefits for the healthcare system in Aotearoa. As tangata whenua experience more equitable health outcomes and, therefore, healthier and longer lives across generations, demand for healthcare services decreases, and so too do healthcare costs in the long-term (Mills et al., 2024; Paine et al., 2024). For whānau experiencing socio-economic deprivation that are targeted by specific kai sovereignty initiatives, this enables time, pūtea, and energy to be spent elsewhere on other areas of their lives or within their community (Leigh et al., 2025; Paine et al., 2024). However, it is essential for the expansion and appreciation of kai sovereignty initiatives throughout Aotearoa. Alone, they cannot bear the burden of the health outcomes Māori experience; only alongside and through intentional policy, systematic, and collective action to produce systems that support Māori, as founded in their worldview, can this truly be supported (Oldham et al., 2024).

Cultural capital

Cultural capital in relation to the Māori economy refers to Māori values, traditional practices, te reo Māori and identity (Schulze et al., 2024), which, according to Best and Love (2010), support the production of economic benefit. In alignment with the third theme of *cultural identity and connection to te ao Māori*, all kai sovereignty initiatives informing this review exhibited evidence of supporting cultural identity and connection to te ao Māori in some shape or form (Elers, 2024; FitzHerbert, 2021; Hond et al., 2019; Hutchings et al., 2020; Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022; Leigh et al., 2025; Savage et al., 2017; Smith & Hutchings, 2024; Stein et al., 2018; Tremane et al., 2018). For example, the māra kai initiatives included, supported secure cultural identities through the connection to the whenua, te reo Māori, traditional practices and through fostered empowerment and self-determination (Durie, 1999; Elers, 2024; Hond et al., 2019; Leigh et al., 2025; Stein et al., 2018). All of which supported community purpose, meaning and cohesion (Hond et al., 2019). Hond et al. (2019) described

māra kai as a vehicle for ‘community development’, in which the community could take control of their own lives, on their own terms. Whakapapa is essential to many outlined kai sovereignty initiatives in this review (Elers, 2024; Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022; Smith & Hutchings, 2024), providing the foundation for networking, exchange, and circulation within local communities and *cyclic Māori economies* (Kawharu et al., 2022; Kawharu, Tapsell, et al., 2022). With more substantial social capital, whānau equity and connection within communities, this creates stronger economies that are grounded within cultural values that are integral within te ao Māori, and based upon trusting, reciprocal relationships between the people and the whenua (Elers, 2024; FitzHerbert, 2021; Hond et al., 2019; Hutchings et al., 2020; Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022; Leigh et al., 2025; Savage et al., 2017; Schulze et al., 2024; Smith & Hutchings, 2024; Tremane et al., 2018).

According to Durie (1999, p. 2), access to te ao Māori and a secure cultural identity support ‘Māori entry into the Māori world’. With increased access and connection to te ao Māori and the promotion of secure cultural identities, this supports Māori individuals, whānau, and communities to better and more successfully engage in the Māori economy (Evans, 2025). To create systems and structures that are grounded in te ao Māori and generate economies that serve Māori instead of Māori serving the economy (Rout et al., 2025). Online, kai sovereignty initiatives make the ‘Māori way’ of managing business visible by upholding tikanga, the integrity of the whenua, and Māori identity, alongside generating economic benefits such as profit (FitzHerbert, 2021; Tremane et al., 2018). Where Māori individuals and collectives rest upon secure cultural identities, this supports the emergence of more successful Māori entrepreneurs, businesses and enterprises, which, in turn, support thriving Māori economies and the long-term holistic wellbeing of Māori individuals, whānau and communities (Schulze et al., 2024).

Produced capital

Produced capital refers to the human-made physical infrastructure and assets that enable the economy to function effectively (Schulze et al., 2024). In alignment with *theme 1*, several articles acknowledged the economic benefits of increased employment opportunities locally for individuals and whānau, whether through greater education or direct employment opportunities arising from the initiatives outlined in this review (Hutchings et al., 2020; Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022; Savage et al., 2017). For example, the Pā to Plate initiative generated employment and opportunities for expansion, for individuals and small local Māori-led enterprises or businesses that grow kai on local whenua (Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022). They supported the expansion of local markets and increased market-based opportunities and environments for selling produce and engaging in whakawhanaungatanga (Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022). Māra kai provide physical infrastructure and green spaces within communities that bind communities together through shared purpose and strengthen connections to others and to the whenua (Elers, 2024; Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022; Leigh et al., 2025; Smith & Hutchings, 2024).

Natural capital

Natural capital refers to natural resources, ecosystems and the environment, as the base that supports economic activity (Schulze et al., 2024). Whenua is the economic base within te ao Māori, providing the foundation for thriving *cyclic Māori economies* and the fundamentals for *planning seven generations ahead*. (Rout et al., 2025; Schulze et al., 2024). Outlined māra kai initiatives innately act as kaitiaki for the whenua (Hutchings et al., 2020), practically through building and restoring soil and increasing biodiversity, but also through educating whānau how to nourish themselves and how to nourish the whenua long-term (Elers, 2024; Hond et al., 2019; Leigh et al., 2025; Stein et al., 2018). Online kai sovereignty initiatives utilised profits

to reinvest in and support the health of the whenua and future generations (Schulze et al., 2024; Tremane et al., 2018).

Research Objective 2: How do the economic benefits produced by kai sovereignty initiatives operate across local, regional and national scales?

Geographic scales

All articles included in this review exhibited economic benefits for local communities, through providing opportunities for communities to connect, flourish or thrive on local whenua (Elers, 2024; FitzHerbert, 2021; Hond et al., 2019; Hutchings et al., 2020; Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022; Leigh et al., 2025; Savage et al., 2017; Smith & Hutchings, 2024; Stein et al., 2018; Tremane et al., 2018). For example, Pā to Plate produced a kin-engaged target market through whakapapa and genealogical ties, encouraging *cyclic Māori economies* by creating a local loop of exchange between the whenua and the community. Through whakapapa connections, physical infrastructure such as community-led māra kai or markets, and secure cultural identities and connection to te ao Māori, producers and consumers can engage in kōrero, connect through kai, and establish, strengthen, and maintain connections within their local community. Hence, support the ability to better engage in the local economy and with local economic opportunities (Elers, 2024; Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022; Kawharu, Tapsell, et al., 2022).

Internet-based kai sovereignty initiatives proved compelling in terms of economic benefits across geographical scales. The Ahikā Kai system, as Ngāi Tahu-led, created an internet-based platform to sell mahinga kai, using the concept of ahikā to guide and aid in its investment and economic development (Tremane et al., 2018). According to Tremane et al. (2018, p. 464), ‘the internet is able to help Indigenous entrepreneurs to walk in both words’, within te ao Māori and

te ao Pākehā, and furthermore support the production of economic benefits whilst upholding tino rangatiratanga (Amoamo et al., 2018; Tremane et al., 2018). The Ahikā Kai system provides an opportunity for Māori-led, whānau-based businesses to engage regionally and nationally through online platforms (Tremane et al., 2018). As built upon Māori ways of knowing and doing, the Ahikā Kai system demonstrates how to maximise economic benefit. Although achieved, there is less of a focus on pūtea or profit, but on tino rangatiratanga of all involved, the expansion of mahinga kai, reinvestment into the whenua and wellbeing of residing whānau for future generations (Amoamo et al., 2018; Schulze et al., 2024; Tremane et al., 2018). Similarly, the economic experiment named ‘Māra kai’ established an internet-based market for Māori kai producers, providing them with an additional circuit of exchange and connecting kai producers and communities across Aotearoa (FitzHerbert, 2021). This pilot kai sovereignty initiative demonstrated the growing possibilities for *cyclic Māori economies* at local, regional, and national scales (FitzHerbert, 2021). The online or internet-based initiatives were of the few initiatives that significantly highlighted how economic benefits operated across regional and national scales (FitzHerbert, 2021; Tremane et al., 2018); this presents an area that may require further research. However, Pā to Plate also demonstrated national economic benefit and the potential to connect to and with other Indigenous populations internationally, being the only initiative in the review to do so (Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022).

Temporal scales

Moewaka Barnes and McCreanor (2019) argue that whenua is the determinant of health, not of wealth. The bulk of kai sovereignty initiatives included in this review were not concerned with how the whenua could produce profit, individual gain or control, but with how they could protect and nourish the whenua for the health and wellbeing of current and future generations (Elers, 2024; Hond et al., 2019; Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022; Leigh et al., 2025;

Moewaka Barnes & McCreanor, 2019; Smith & Hutchings, 2024; Tremane et al., 2018). Therefore, the evidence was clear that economic benefits produced by kai sovereignty initiatives operate across generations and across time, aligning with the second theme of *planning seven generations ahead*. In relation to natural capital, whenua is at the foundation of te ao Māori, Māori identity, and hauora Māori (Moewaka Barnes & McCreanor, 2019). *Theme 2* highlighted that the way kai sovereignty initiatives are designed directly supports the health of the whenua across time (Elers, 2024; Hond et al., 2019; Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022; Leigh et al., 2025; Smith & Hutchings, 2024; Tremane et al., 2018), with many also generating reciprocal and healing relationships between tangata and whenua across and for future generations (Elers, 2024; Hond et al., 2019; Hutchings et al., 2020; Leigh et al., 2025; Moewaka Barnes & McCreanor, 2019; Smith & Hutchings, 2024; Stein et al., 2018; Taiapa & Moekawa Barnes, 2023).

Research Objective 3: What are the key factors that influence how kai sovereignty initiatives in Aotearoa produce economic benefits?

Self-sufficiency was a fundamental mechanism for Māori kai sovereignty. Self-sufficiency on local whenua emerged as a focal point of kai sovereignty initiatives informing this review (Hond et al., 2019; Hutchings et al., 2020; Savage et al., 2017; Stein et al., 2018). The Parihaka Community Garden supports improving the ability of whānau and their local community to be food self-sufficient, to pass on essential mātauranga, and to reclaim traditional kai practices on their whenua (Stein et al., 2018). Promoting food self-sufficiency and tino rangatiratanga in growing and harvesting kai supports reduced reliance on, or over-dependency on, supermarkets, unhealthy kai, and the Government (Smith & Hutchings, 2024). Supporting sustainability and sustainable practices fell hand in hand with self-sufficiency. In relation to *theme 2*, several kai sovereignty initiatives took sustainable approaches and focused on meeting

the needs of the whenua and the social and economic needs of people in the present without compromising the capacity of future generations to do the same (Elers, 2024; Hond et al., 2019; Hutchings et al., 2020; Hutchings et al., 2012; Leigh et al., 2025; Smith & Hutchings, 2024; Stein et al., 2018; Tremane et al., 2018). According to Smith and Hutchings (2024), understanding Māori food systems through a te ao Māori lens provides a platform of alternative pathways to supporting socio-economic sustainability now and in the future. This includes supporting the sustainable development of iwi and whānau owned businesses and providing long-term, sustainable, and reliable economic benefits for individuals and whānau throughout Aotearoa (Tremane et al., 2018).

Self-sufficiency and sustainability, as fostered through kai sovereignty initiatives, were key factors in increasing access to healthy kai, promoting food security, and countering food poverty (Elers, 2024; Oldham et al., 2024). Food security improves when healthy kai is affordable and accessible (Stein et al., 2018). The Pukehīnau māra kai initiative, developed in an urban public housing estate, was established to combat the cost-of-living crisis and was designed to promote food security, doing so through greater access to free kai for whānau who were experiencing food insecurity and building and empowering resilient communities (Leigh et al., 2025; Stein et al., 2018). Similarly, many māra kai initiatives supported food security and food sovereignty within their community through sustainable practices and self-sufficiency (Elers, 2024; Hutchings et al., 2020; Smith & Hutchings, 2024; Stein et al., 2018). Although effective in reducing food insecurity within their community, large-scale, sustainable kai practices like māra kai are required to address food insecurity in Aotearoa effectively (Leigh et al., 2025; Oldham et al., 2024). Additionally, according to Stein et al. (2018), like community-based kai sovereignty initiatives, these initiatives need to support community control and tino rangatiratanga over locally grown kai to effectively reduce food insecurity.

According to Stein et al. (2018, p. 151), the ‘succession of knowledge is tino rangatiratanga’; therefore, having the necessary tools, resources and mātauranga is essential to one’s ability to be self-determining and make informed decisions. To enable kai sovereignty and economic benefits, whānau must first have the knowledge, skills, and resources to be self-determining and leaders in their own economic growth and aspirations, to innovate and apply the knowledge gained by kai sovereignty within their lives and across generations (Hond et al., 2019; Hutchings et al., 2020; Kawharu, 2019; Kawharu et al., 2022). For example, Elers (2024) outlines a māra kai initiative that supports whānau in learning to grow kai and feed their whānau in their own māra, learning the practical components and tikanga behind this process and supporting whānau to be self-determining. Supporting growth at an individual skill and knowledge level enhances the capacity of whānau to achieve greater economic and wellbeing outcomes, and supports whānau financially through increased access to healthy kai and knowledge of how to access it (Elers, 2024; Hond et al., 2019; Leigh et al., 2025; Stein et al., 2018). In turn, this supports the wider community and collective as a whole and circulates mātauranga and pūtea within local *cyclic Māori economies* (Elers, 2024).

Strengths and Limitations

A fundamental strength of this rapid review was its examination and contribution to a new and limited area of research, with just under half of the articles demonstrating moderate or moderate-low evidence of economic benefit. As a piece of work, this rapid review contributes to academia by providing insight into an under-researched topic that, without doubt, has benefits for the lives of tangata whenua in Aotearoa. As grounded in kaupapa Māori, this review centred on Māori voices and perspectives from te ao Māori, thereby ensuring congruence with the review's focus population. As a rapid review, it could be conducted in a short period of time and within the project's scope through a simplified process (Stefanon et

al., 2023). This review was exploratory and aims to contribute to broader work in this space in the future. This could support alternative exploration, bring greater attention and awareness to the many economic benefits of kai sovereignty initiatives, and support the growth of kai sovereignty throughout Aotearoa.

There was a lack of research on this kaupapa that explicitly outlined the economic benefits of kai sovereignty initiatives. While the purpose of kai sovereignty and kai sovereignty initiatives is not necessarily to generate economic benefits, it must be noted that these initiatives do produce secondary economic benefits. Given the kaupapa Māori research and the project scope, the opportunity to explore other Indigenous perspectives across the globe was limited; this may have strengthened the findings. Finally, the review was limited to kai sovereignty initiatives that were published or had an online presence.

Recommendations

This review concerns a new and emerging area, evident in only 11 articles included, as much of the literature was limited in its focus on the economic benefits of kai sovereignty initiatives; hence, further research on this topic is warranted. There are ample findings on the economic benefits of kai sovereignty initiatives at local scales, yet few on how these benefits operate across regional and national scales. Given that internet-based initiatives were among the few to demonstrate how economic benefits occur at regional and national scales, this area calls for further focus and research. This topic could be of interest globally to other Indigenous populations, with the exploration of international economic benefits proving limited yet promising across the literature. Further investigation is required, and a helpful next step could be to conduct a qualitative study that explores the economic benefits of kai sovereignty initiatives through a te ao Māori lens, across regional, national, and international scales.

Additionally, the findings from this review signal a need for research examining which types of policy or systemic action would best support and prioritise kai sovereignty and kai sovereignty initiatives for and with tangata whenua (Oldham et al., 2024). Furthermore, it is recommended that:

- Additional research should be conducted on the economic benefits of kai sovereignty initiatives, given the limited literature available.
- Further research should be conducted to examine how the economic benefits of kai sovereignty initiatives function at regional and national geographical scales.
- Further research should examine what types of policy and systemic action would best support Māori kai sovereignty and kai sovereignty initiatives for and with tangata whenua in Aotearoa.

Conclusion

This rapid review provides an analysis of the economic benefits of kai sovereignty initiatives throughout Aotearoa as underpinned by kaupapa Māori. This review has contributed to the understanding and documentation of the economic benefits produced by kai sovereignty initiatives at local and temporal scales, and through cultural, natural, human, and produced capital. This finding is fundamental, as it emphasises the need to further address and research this topic and the gaps identified throughout. Literature needs to reflect the realities. Although it suggests that economic benefits are not often the sole purpose of kai sovereignty initiatives, they still very much exist, and appropriate research and acknowledgement could support further recognition and development of Māori kai sovereignty and Māori economies in Aotearoa. Looking to our past, we can plan for a future that values and supports Māori kai sovereignty

and kai sovereignty initiatives, and, furthermore, support the development, wellbeing, success, and flourishing of tangata whenua for now and generations to come.

APPENDIX A

Date	Database	Search string	Number of results
19 th Dec 2025	Google Scholar	("Māori" OR "tangata whenua") AND ("food sovereignty" OR "kai sovereignty" OR "māra kai" OR "mahinga kai") AND ("economic benefi*" OR "econom*")	131
29 th Dec 2025	InformIT	("Māori" OR "Maori" OR "Tangata whenua") AND ("Kai sovereignty" OR "Food sovereignty" OR "Māra kai" OR "Mahinga kai" OR "Food system") AND "Economic" OR "Economic benefit" OR "Economy"	24
29 th Dec 2025	Scopus	"Māori" OR "Tangata whenua" AND "Food sovereignty" OR "Kai sovereignty" OR "Māra kai" OR "Mahinga kai" AND "Economy" OR "Economic benefit"	182
2 nd Jan 2026	Web of Science	("Māori" OR "Tangata whenua") AND ("Food sovereignty" OR "Kai sovereignty" OR "Māra kai" OR "Mahinga kai") AND ("Economic benefit*" OR "Econom*")	17

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