

Future of Food

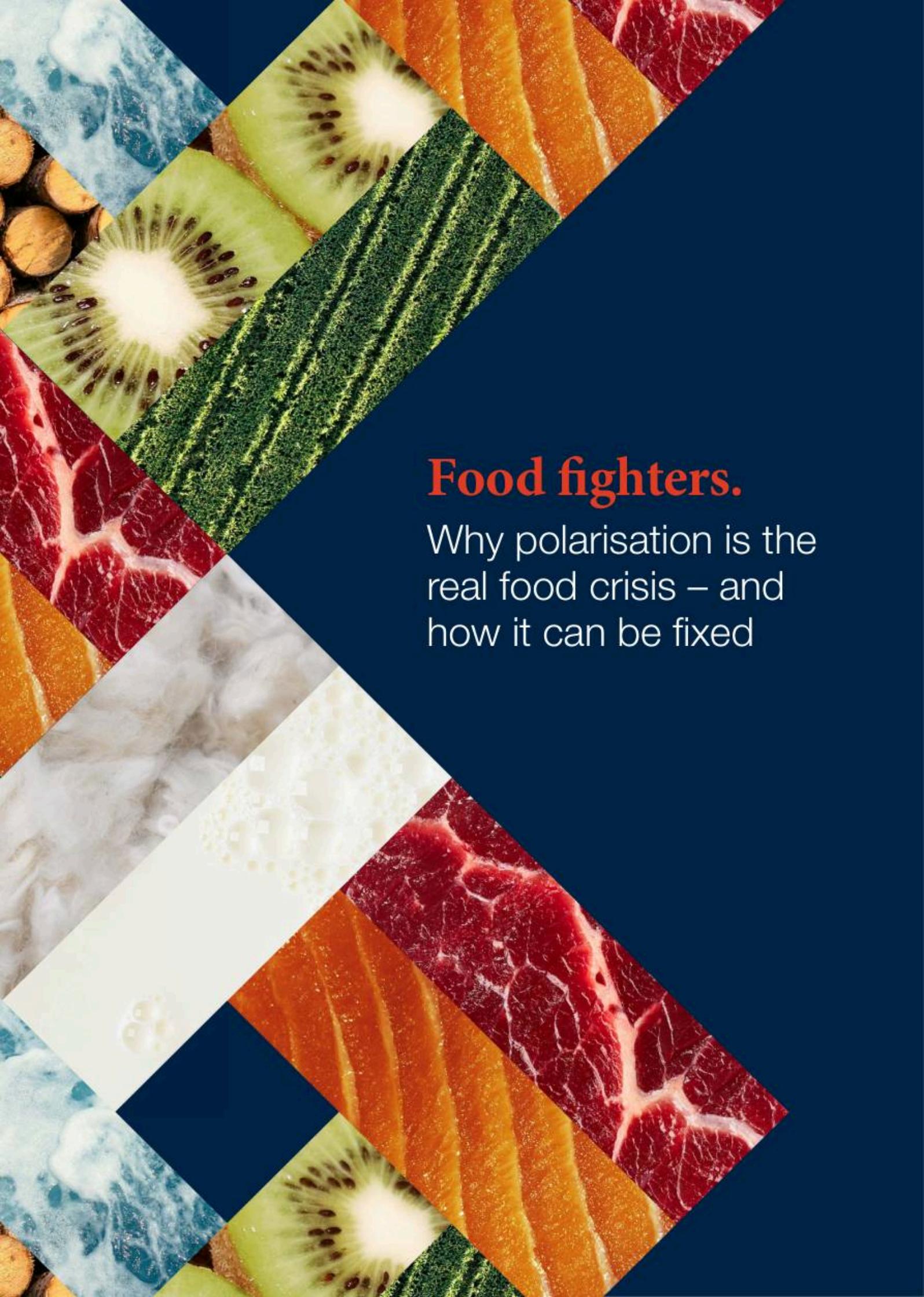
Food fighters.

Why polarisation is the real food crisis – and how it can be fixed

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Food futurist and keynote speaker at E Tipu New Zealand Future Food and Fibre Summit, Jack Bobo, argues the food system's hardest problem is social. When no one can trust what you say, why would they buy your product? He argues framing and language can determine whether industry and advocates collaborate or reach a deadlock. In a wide-ranging conversation, FoodHQ asks Jack to reflect on the future of food to 2100.

Opportunity: Rebuild trust by changing the story.

We have an opportunity to move from argument to problem solving, and from volume to value, by making credible claims the centre of the food story. If communicators start with what the system has achieved, then name what still needs fixing, they create an on ramp for industry to engage rather than resist. For New Zealand, that same shift supports a premium strategy, quality, provenance, and trust, instead of chasing scale. It also makes room for innovation and multiple pathways to a better 2050, provided leaders stay clear on the goal and flexible on the route.

Threat: Polarisation is the hidden blocker.

Once the food debate becomes a story of heroes and villains, farmers, companies, and advocates are pushed into defensive corners, and collaboration collapses. That, in turn, accelerates the erosion of trust in food claims and institutions, right when the system is also being stressed by harder-to-manage shocks, climate disruption, geopolitical instability, and trade fragmentation. In that environment, hyper-efficient supply chains become fragile, and fragile systems fail.

Jack Bobo is the author of 'Why Smart People Make Bad Food Choices' and is Executive Director of the Rothman Family Institute for Food Studies at UCLA in the United States. He is speaking at the E Tipu New Zealand Future Food and Fibre Summit in Christchurch in May 2026.



FoodHQ: Thanks for joining us, Jack. Your insights are incredibly important to the New Zealand food sector. Let's start with the big picture. The Green Revolution last century lowered the cost of food and made high quality food more available, especially from places like New Zealand. Now we have plateaued, in productivity and in trade. What is your sense of food availability and food quality around the world?

Jack Bobo: It is complicated, and it is different in every country and region. Latin America continues to increase production. We have seen plateaus in places like Africa. In Asia, we still see some growth.

But remember the trajectory we have been on. The Green Revolution had a big impact. If we were farming today with 1960s technology, we would need about a billion additional hectares of land to feed the people we feed now. Compare that to about four billion hectares of forest on the planet. Agricultural technology and innovation have helped avoid cutting down more than a quarter of the world's forests.

That progress has trade-offs. More intensive farming can bring nutrient runoff and other impacts. Not cutting down forests is part of that trade-off.

The challenge of producing more food remains critical. Some 600m to 700m people go to bed hungry. We are not even feeding everyone we have today. We will add another 1b people by 2050, so feeding people becomes harder.

It is also worth looking beyond 2050. Population will likely peak sometime in the 2060s, 2070s, or 2080s, then decline. Countries like China will have populations hundreds of millions smaller by 2100 than they have today. The world will be a very different place.

In many ways, the drive to feed more people is a 2050 problem. Every day between now and 2050, it gets harder to feed the world.

When you say it like that, it does not feel like much time.

Even 2100 feels far away, but 2100 is to us what 1950 is now. That is not ancient history. The decisions we make matter. If we know what that future is likely to look like, we should prepare for it now.

After 2050, the question is whether we can reach 2050 without cutting down forests and without draining rivers, lakes, and aquifers. If we can, we are in good shape for the long term because we will not need dramatically more food.

It will still get harder to produce food because of climate, geopolitical disruption, and trade disruption. But the nature of the problem changes.

For 10,000 years, farmers were asked to do one thing, produce more food. We are living through a unique transition, from more food to better food. Food that is better for people and better for the planet. That is a tough, but inevitable transition.

At the same time, we are on the cusp of technological change, precision fermentation, genetic technologies like CRISPR, and newer models like vertical farming. Do you agree disruption is coming, and how does it change what you described?

The bigger disruptions are climate, geopolitics, and trade. Those are harder to prepare for. Precision fermentation and gene editing are new technologies that build on what we have done before. They either build

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on what we do in fields or create alternatives through bioreactors.

These technologies are less disruptive than people think. They are more in continuity with the past. Many people see precision fermentation as competing with traditional agriculture, especially in livestock and animal protein. Cultivated meat, or dairy and egg proteins made through precision fermentation, might compete. But we often misunderstand the opportunity.

Let me give three scenarios for the future of protein.

Scenario one, livestock wins. We expand animal agriculture to meet protein growth by 2050.

Scenario two, alternative proteins win, meaning beans and lentils expand.

Scenario three, livestock goes bust, meaning we produce less animal protein in 2050.

Most livestock producers would say they want scenario one. But in a country like New Zealand, how likely is it to double livestock production by 2050? It seems very unlikely.

In scenario one, production rises somewhere, perhaps Brazil or Argentina, but probably not New Zealand. If demand and supply both increase, New Zealand income may be flat, and the environmental consequences remain.

In scenario two, demand for animal protein increases but supply stays flat. Producers in places like New Zealand can make more money because demand outpaces supply.

In scenario three, if the world reduces production in the least productive countries, few believe that means New Zealand. If supply tightens further, New Zealand

becomes an ultra-premium product that the world aspires to, and producers can make much more.

So, we often see technologies as competition rather than opportunity.

That leads neatly to New Zealand. We have always wanted to go from volume to value. We are efficient volume producers, but we lose value to manufacturers, distributors, and retailers. Is it realistic for New Zealand to move up the value chain, or should we double down on producing cheap commodities?

The future rewards value and punishes volume. As population plateaus and productivity continues to increase, demand levels off, and supply keeps growing. In that world, volume producers get squeezed, year after year. They become more efficient, then produce more, then get squeezed more.

The organisations that make money are those that capture value. Do you want to be Samsung, selling most of the phones but making a small share of the profits, or Apple, selling a smaller share but making most of the profits? That is what food will look like.

New Zealand is well positioned for value because it already has a strong reputation. You can leverage that into higher value products. If you compete on volume, it is a losing game. The future will reward quality, and food systems do not need to be hyper efficient, they need to be resilient.

That links back to disruptions. You need to prepare for geopolitical, climate, and trade shocks. A hyper efficient system is a fragile system.

“You can’t solve any of those problems if you can’t collaborate, and you can’t collaborate if it’s all polarised.”

Value depends on trust. Claims need to be trusted, nutritionally, environmentally, and ethically. You write about the decline in trust and the accuracy of food information. What are you seeing?

That is my focus at UCLA. We look at how to shift narratives about food to reduce polarisation, increase trust, and create space for innovation.

The World Economic Forum has identified polarisation as a top threat. I think polarisation may be the number one threat because you cannot solve climate change or geopolitical risks if you cannot collaborate, and polarisation undermines collaboration.

We focus on changing dialogue so people can problem solve together. A concrete example. I worked with an international organisation. They asked us to review polarisation and trust in their communications. They often described the food system as unfair.

There are unfair aspects, hunger, labour practices, animal welfare. But when an advocacy group says the system is unfair, people working in the system become defensive. They expect the next line to be, and it is your fault.

If instead you say, our food system has done amazing things, but it has left too many people behind, farmers think, that includes me, and companies think, we should do something. The framing at the start creates a problem-solving mindset or a defensive mindset. We often blame the audience, instead of examining how our communication created that mindset.

You are saying an adversarial approach splinters people and stops listening.

Yes. People say they want truth, but people value different things in different moments, safety, quality,

price, or how workers are treated. Disagreement can be values, but it can also be mindset.

Helping people see different perspectives can reveal shared goals pursued differently. People can have good intentions and still disagree on method.

That connects to your book, Why Smart People Make Bad Food Choices. There is cognitive bias around convenience, price, and speed, and we trade off quality and labour standards. What did you learn about why smart people make bad choices?

We often expect individuals to change the world with their pocketbook. But you can only buy what is in front of you. In a restaurant you buy what is on the menu. In a grocery store you buy what is on the shelves. The food environment shapes choices.

The first third of the book covers cognitive biases. The second explores how the food environment has shifted over the last fifty years. The final third argues that instead of trying to fix individuals, we should fix society and the food environment.

We have never known more about health and nutrition, yet we have never been more obese. We have menu labelling and more options, yet the problem gets worse. People in 1960 knew little about nutrition, but obesity rates were far lower. The food environment delivered healthier outcomes, at least on obesity.

Individual strategies are limited. Portion sizes are too big, and you can decide to eat half, but your brain reads that as not finishing a meal. Smaller plates at home help a bit, but your brain still knows what the real world looks like.

“For 10,000 years, farmers were asked to do one thing, produce more food. We live at that one unique moment in all of human history when we’re transitioning from more food to better food.”

If portion sizes were appropriate everywhere, we would rewire our expectations.

Most Americans do not know what an adult serving looks like. Take a McDonald’s Happy Meal. The small fries today are like a large fries in 1972. The soda is about six ounces. If that were the adult serving today, people would think it is too small. We should not be surprised people over-consume when they cannot estimate calories by sight.

Why not blame fast food companies and supermarkets, since they control portions and what is on shelves?

Two answers. First, through the polarisation and trust lens. We are working on a guide called the Food Activist Guide to Heroes and Villains. If you cast a sector as the villain of your story, you become the villain of their story. You mobilise them to make sure you fail.

If you say McDonald’s is the villain, they must disagree, and they will build a counter narrative, often blaming consumers. That creates gridlock. If you approach them and say you are concerned about obesity and you would like to work on it, they will likely say they are concerned too.

Restaurants often say portion size does not drive profit. The main costs are real estate and labour, not ingredients. When they give smaller portions, people do not return. That is why a societal approach matters. If a rule applied to everyone, such as limiting calories per meal, it becomes a level playing field. There are many ways to approach it. The point is to create an on ramp for industry to work with you, instead of a structure that makes collaboration impossible.

Let’s talk about innovation. The future you described requires innovation and different communication. How can laypeople use strategic foresight to inform investment and sector decisions?

Most people ask two questions about the future. What do I think will happen, and what should I do about it? That is strategic planning. It prepares for the future you expect and de-risks the future.

Strategic foresight approaches it differently. It is not about predicting the future. We use tools like the futures cone. In the middle is the probable future, the one strategic planning prepares for. Beyond that are plausible futures, which could happen, then possible futures, which are less likely but still could happen.

Our best future is often not the probable future. It is elsewhere in the possible space. The best future for the planet, or for my family, is not necessarily the most likely future, but it can be possible.

So, the decisions you make to reach your best future are different from decisions you make to prepare for the worst. Instead of asking how do I de-risk the future, ask what an amazing food future would look like in 2050, sustainable, nutritious, equitable. You can describe it. Then ask, how do we get there?

Some will say eat less meat. Others will say reduce methane from livestock. We can do both. There are plenty of people in the world who will consume what New Zealand does not. The future rewards clarity, but it punishes certainty. Clarity of vision is essential; certainty of path is a mistake.

“If portion sizes were appropriate everywhere, we would rewire our expectations.”

Does that model also account for terrible futures, pandemics, wars, climate change, and other disruptions?

Yes. We should anticipate a more disruptive future.

That is why fragile supply chains are a risk. In the past we thought efficiency was always better. With more disruption, that efficiency becomes a new risk.

Returning to innovation. We also need to talk differently about innovation. Most people love innovation almost as much as they despise change. There is nowhere people despise change more than food, because food brings you together with friends and family. If people mess with my food, they are messing with my family.

It is innovation in my smartphone, but it is change in my food. So, communication matters.

The traditional way to communicate innovation is problems and solutions. Climate problem, therefore climate solution. People believe the problems, but they can tell you are trying to sell them the solution. They can feel set up.

We are working on a contextual framework for risk communication that sits on top of traditional risk communication. It asks, is there a way to communicate innovation that leaves people inspired instead of mildly concerned?

An example from the UK. CO2 emissions are about 5.5 tonnes per person. That seems high, and it can make young people despair. It is also at a 150-year low. Historical context can turn something that feels scary into something that is more inspiring.

Problems do not go away, but our ability to tackle them changes. If you beat people up with problems, you get apathy, not action. If you inspire people, everything changes.

So, you talk about the problems people care about, then the future they want. The next question becomes, how do we get there? Then you can talk about innovation. It is a narrative structure that draws people into solutions.

Is that applicable at a business level? It sounds political.

It is absolutely useful at a company level. Many companies should be doing it.

I see alternative protein pitches that hammer the deck with the impact of animal protein. Many VCs eat meat, so it does not resonate.

Most people will not eat your product because they believe what you believe. They will eat it in spite of it. So, you need to get your moral worldview out of the way of me enjoying your product.

Historical context makes your technology more believable. The world does not have to be a disaster for people to adopt it. It has to be a real problem with a believable solution.

To be part of conversations like this, join us at E Tipu: New Zealand's Future Food and Fibre Summit, May 21–22, Te Pae, Christchurch. Jack Bobo is one of our fabulous keynote speakers. www.etipu.co.nz

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Future of Food series

FoodHQ is the New Zealand hub of leading food and food production researchers that advocates for collaboration, food innovation and investment among researchers, industry, and policymakers to tackle challenges to advance the food industry.

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