

Global and national influences affecting Foundation North's communities

Foundation North Strategy Review -
Evidence Review

May 2026

Prepared by



Background

Foundation North launched a 15-year strategy in 2018. It was agreed to check in on the strategy every three years, to be responsive to communities and shifting context and strengthen how the strategy is operationalised.

The first phase of the 2026 strategy review presents the latest evidence on:

1. Global and national influences affecting Foundation North's rohe (this report).
2. Regional data profiles of Te Tai Tokerau (Northland) and Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland).
3. A review of best philanthropic practice and of what communities have told Foundation North they value about its current approach and how to strengthen it.

This report

This report draws from research from the last three years (see References) to indicate the wider context for Foundation North's diverse places and people. It summarises significant global and national trends and influences for Foundation North to consider in its strategy refresh. It also shares several frameworks to support wellbeing and enhance lives.

Summary

"Uncertainty is the defining theme of the global risks outlook in 2026." World Economic Forum 2026.

A global rewiring

We are living in a time of upheaval and transition. Our unique island nation and society are being impacted by multiple converging global and national forces:

Geopolitical instability driven by increased global tensions, war, and conflict. In particular, the US war on Iran is increasing fuel prices and having flow on inflationary effects (RBNZ, 2026). It is also challenging dependence on fossil fuel use.

Economic restructuring, including shifting trade alliances and economic uncertainty. A rapid redistribution of value and wealth is underway, escalating social inequality. Inequality was identified as the most concerning global risk in the 2026 Global Risks Report, for the second year running.

Climate change and environmental degradation through biodiversity loss, soil, air and water pollution and biosecurity risks. High-impact weather events are intensifying.

Technological disruption as advanced technology and AI reshape every sector.

Inflation, coupled with income and cost of living pressures, is increasing material hardship.

Weakening democracy and social cohesion, reflected in a rise in authoritarianism, misinformation, disinformation, lower trust in government, growth in people feeling disaffected and higher visibility of prejudice and discrimination. Financial stress is a primary driver of low social cohesion (Eaqub et al 2026).

Other global risks include asteroid and comet impacts; severe pandemics; nuclear incidents and electricity supply shortages (Kerr et al 2025). There are also **major opportunities**, for example,

through community and technology-driven innovation, policy resets, renewable energy and green business.

Nationally, the Climate Change Commission has recently identified the ten most significant climate risks facing the country and urges moving out of a 'react and recover' approach (May 2026). These risks are already affecting people: **key infrastructure** (water infrastructure, buildings, roads and rail networks); **nature and bioeconomy** (ecosystems, biodiversity and forestry); **risks for communities** (social and community wellbeing, emergency management and risks specifically affecting Māori); and risks related to **decision making and delivery** and **central and local government funding**.

New Zealand's demographic future is being dynamically reshaped by an ageing population, declining fertility, a growing reliance on immigration, uneven regional growth and increasing ethnic and cultural diversity (Lala, Spoonley and Gluckman 2026).

Our community sector is being squeezed by resourcing constraints, increased demand and complexity.

Enhancing lives in challenging times

Challenging times invite a focus on the things that keep us individually and collectively well - the things known to enhance lives. Fundamentally, this includes:

- **Material wellbeing** – adequate income, secure housing, meaningful employment, settlement support for newcomers, access to quality education and food security (Salvation Army 2025, Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission 2024, Salvation Army 2026).
- **For Māori, connection to Māoritanga**, whenua, whakapapa, iwi, hāpu and whānau, and the ability to exercise **tino rangatiratanga** and **mana motuhake** (Salvation Army 2026).
- **Social inclusion and belonging** and tackling pervasive racism and other forms of discrimination and prejudice (Belong Aotearoa 2025, Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission 2024).
- **Community-led solutions** and services that reflect cultural and lived realities (Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission 2024).
- **Access to quality services and opportunities** that meet people's needs, especially in rural and isolated areas (Horizons 2025), and for disabled people (Salvation Army 2026, [Enabling Good Lives](#)¹).
- **Mental health support**, and especially child and youth mental health resilience (Ohi Rangatahi Data Insights 2025).

Global influences

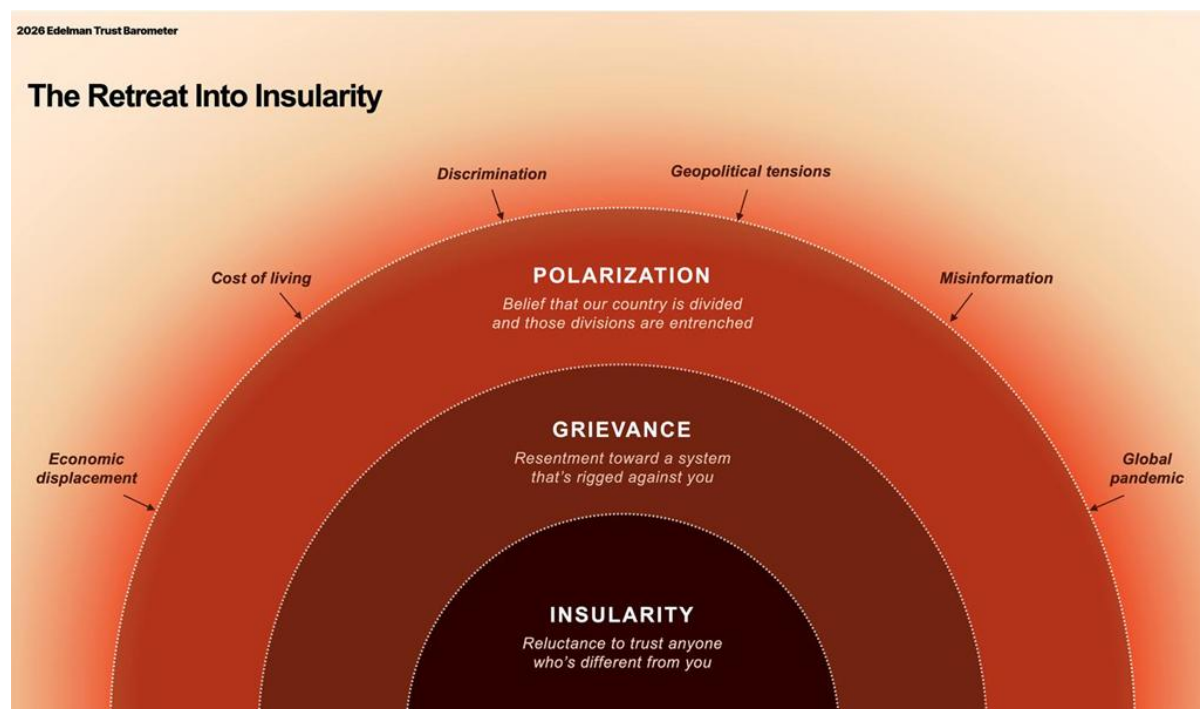
Declining trust, diminishing transparency and respect for the rule of law, along with heightened protectionism, are threatening longstanding international relations, trade and investment and increasing the propensity for conflict (World Economic Forum 2026).

Many macro trends are converging to create a time of uncertainty and a global rewiring not seen for decades (Jana 2025). The Global Risks Report 2026 highlights geoeconomic confrontation, economic risks, extreme weather events and largely unchecked technological risks as being top of mind globally.

¹ Leaders in the disabled community developed [Enabling Good Lives](#) to increase choice and control for disabled people and their families.

Misinformation, disinformation, cyber insecurity and adverse outcomes from AI have all grown as global concerns. Rising societal and political polarisation is intensifying pressures on democratic systems, as extremist social, cultural and political movements challenge institutional resilience and public trust. Inequality was selected by respondents as the most interconnected global risk for a second year running.

The Edelman Trust Barometer is a global annual online survey of 28 countries² that is in its 26th year. Over 20 years, it has traced the erosion of a shared reality based on trust among people and in governments, into a more insular experience of trust focused on your own network and those who are more like yourself. The image below charts key forces driving this shift globally.



Other themes in this report that resonate in Aotearoa New Zealand are:

- The income divide has more than doubled since 2012.
- Only 32 percent believe the next generation will be better off.
- Trade and recession-related job fears have hit an all-time high.
- Most people on low incomes fear being left behind by AI.
- Fear that foreign actors spread disinformation to sow domestic division is at an all-time high.
- There is a widespread decline in exposure to differing political views.
- Trust is weakened in governments, business and news organisations and grown in local networks (family, friends, neighbours, co-workers).

The report notes that trust needs to be brokered across people with differences by surfacing common interests and translating one another's needs, goals, and realities. A trust broker can be a person, organisation or institution trusted by each stakeholder group facing a common problem.

² New Zealand is not included but Australia and many OECD countries are. Representative data is gathered from each country in relation to age, gender and region.

National influences

These global forces land on a national landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand already shaped by entrenched patterns of inequity. Other key national dynamics affecting Foundation North's rohe are shared below.

Wealth inequality

Statistics New Zealand 2024 data show that in terms of wealth distribution in Aotearoa New Zealand:

- The top 10% own 48.5% of all wealth.
- The bottom 50% share just 6.7%.
- The bottom 20% have negative net worth - averaging -\$9,000.
- The Gini coefficient is 66.1 (where total inequality is 100), which is high by international standards.

Persistent disadvantage is embedded

A 2023 New Zealand Productivity Commission report, *A Fair Chance for All*, notes that despite innate strengths and resilience, far too many New Zealanders experience persistent disadvantage, and that the costs of this are borne by all of us. Persistent disadvantage has three domains:

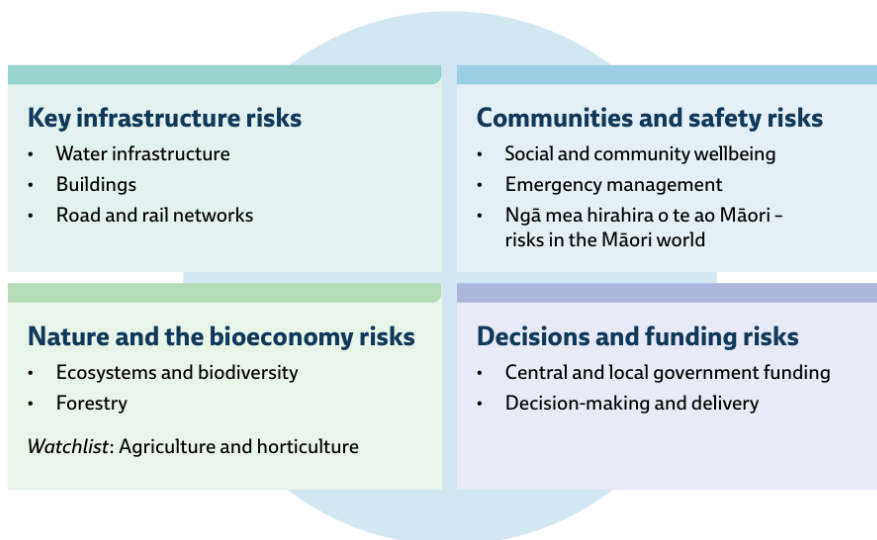
1. being left out (excluded or lacking identity, belonging and connection)
2. doing without (deprived or lacking the means to achieve their aspirations)
3. being income poor (income poverty or lacking prosperity).

The report found that around one in five New Zealanders (18.2% or 697,000) experienced persistent disadvantage in one or more domains in 2013 and 2018, and one in 20 (4.5% or 172,000) experienced complex and multiple forms of persistent disadvantage (in two to three domains).

Key drivers include siloed and fragmented government, short-termism, power imbalances, discrimination and the ongoing impact of colonisation. Social, economic, health and other conditions, along with life and past events, can make people more vulnerable to persistent disadvantage.

Climate change

A just-released Climate Change Commission report (May 2026) notes that climate change is increasingly affecting the essentials of daily life. In the country's second national climate change risk assessment, ten top risk areas where focused action would make the biggest difference are shared in four key categories.



Specific risks for Māori include cultural sites of significance, access to taonga species, and economic impacts in climate-sensitive primary sectors, where there are high levels of iwi/Māori ownership and employment.

Acting to strengthen the country's underpinning structures and tools – such as funding and financing systems, trust in democratic institutions, social connections and wellbeing – will be important to support the adaptation needed for climate change.

Social cohesion

The Social Cohesion in New Zealand Report 2026 surveyed over 2,800 people in 2025 and found strong pillars of cohesion to build on (Helen Clark Foundation April 2026):

- Over 80% take pride in the New Zealand way of life and culture.
- A consistent sense of belonging in New Zealand held across the country, for local and overseas born.
- Young people are more aspirational than older people, although they also experience worse social cohesion outcomes.

The 2024 survey found that New Zealand fared worse than Australia on every measure of social cohesion, and the 2025 survey found that social cohesion here was weakening across almost all dimensions, with particular declines in belief that hard work brings a better life, a fair go for all, and trust in government and courts.

Three distinct groups were revealed in terms of social cohesion in New Zealand in 2025:

- 30% are connected, experiencing high cohesion across all dimensions
- 41% are ambivalent, experiencing middling cohesion and low participation
- 28% are alienated, disconnected from traditional civic and social connections, though often engaged in protest, online and other activities.

Financial stress, political alliance, institutional distrust, and social isolation reinforce each other. They produce a population that is frustrated and disconnecting from the conventional institutions we rely on for collective decision-making.

Important trends noted in the report include a rise in loneliness and isolation (which can lead to oppositional engagement and extremism); trust in government weakening (only 39% in 2025); and the gradual erosion of support for immigration across a range of indicators.

A central finding of the April 2026 Social Cohesion in New Zealand Report is that financial stress is the strongest driver of low social cohesion in this country:

Financial stress is the dominant driver of low cohesion, and no amount of community programming can compensate for economic policy that leaves people behind... poverty alleviation is a critical social cohesion policy pillar.

The strong correlation between material wellbeing and cohesion is shown in this example relating to housing:

Homeowners show 7.4 percentage points higher civic participation and 14 points higher neighbourhood belonging than renters. The likely mechanism is duration in place: ownership creates a stake in the community that, over time, anchors both belonging and participation. Renting disrupts this process, because transience limits the time needed for belonging to develop. This matters given that half of adults now rent. Policies need to simultaneously increase housing supply, strengthen long-term tenure security and tenant rights for renters, and invest in mixed-use community spaces, institutions, [and] networks that enable belonging independently of whether someone owns their home.

The Salvation Army 2026 report notes worsening trends in terms of material wellbeing, with recent child poverty gains reversed, rough sleepers doubling in Auckland, and 90,000 young people left outside of work, education or training.

The Human Rights Commission surveyed New Zealanders' awareness, understanding and attitudes to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, human rights and New Zealand's constitution. The survey found that a sense of belonging, respect for human rights, and an understanding of our history are overwhelmingly viewed by New Zealanders as important to Aotearoa New Zealand's future. It also highlighted the importance of respectful discussion about Te Tiriti (viewed as important by 78%), positive relationships between Māori and the Crown (83%), and legal and constitutional protection of Te Tiriti (70%).

In December 2025, the United Nations [Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination](#) called on Aotearoa New Zealand to uphold Te Tiriti, making a specific [recommendation](#) to Government to "take measures to counter misinformation and divisive narratives regarding the Treaty and to promote public understanding of its role in advancing harmony and equality". The Committee warned that weakening Treaty protections "could undermine progress towards reconciliation and risk entrenching historical, structural, and systemic discrimination against Māori"

Vulnerable community sector

Organisations report feeling overwhelmed by social, environmental, and political factors that are largely outside of their control. Most organisations are making do as best they can, but precarity and vulnerability are standard (Community Networks Aotearoa 2024).

The community sector, including iwi, community and voluntary organisations, is under severe strain, with organisations facing a "crisis" of surging demand, worker burnout, and financial sustainability issues. While acknowledged as essential for supporting communities, many organisations report high stress levels, unsustainable workloads, and a need for greater funding to meet complex community needs (ComVoices 2023). This long-standing situation was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and events since.

Community Networks Aotearoa's 2024 State of the Sector Report underscores the urgent need for greater support and recognition of the work these organisations do. It highlights the agility and innovation of the sector as organisations adapt to respond to changing communities in increasingly difficult circumstances. Policies and resourcing that not only sustain but strengthen the sector are called for.

Factors that strengthen wellbeing

Foundations for collective wellbeing and cohesion include adequate income, housing, health and social connection; cultural identity and belonging; knowledge and skills; access to employment; stable families; and effective government policies and supports (Productivity Commission 2023).

Te Whare Tapa Whā is a holistic Māori health model developed by Sir Mason Durie in 1984, visualising wellbeing as a four-walled *whareniui* (meeting house). It emphasises that health requires balance across four interconnected dimensions - physical, mental, social, and spiritual - with connection to the land (*whenua*) as the foundation.

- [Taha Tinana \(Physical\)](#): Health of the body, including physical activity and nutrition.
- [Taha Hinengaro \(Mental/Emotional\)](#): Mental health, thoughts, and emotions.
- [Taha Whānau \(Social/Family\)](#): Family and social networks.
- [Taha Wairua \(Spiritual\)](#): Spiritual wellbeing, identity, and connection.

The New Zealand Mental Health Foundation promotes the [five ways to wellbeing](#). Developed by the New Economics Foundation and based on global research on what universally supports human wellbeing, the five ways are: take notice (be present, pay attention, be mindful); be active; connect; keep learning; and give to others.

This review highlights the dynamic and challenging context we live in. Enhancing lives in these times means nurturing wellbeing today and supporting communities to enhance intergenerational wellbeing.

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