

Introduction

The cost-of-living crisis is a major social issue across New Zealand. The cost-of-living crisis is an economic concept where individuals find it challenging to afford basic human needs such as food, housing and electricity. This is because the increase in prices of everyday goods and services is faster than an individual's income. This makes it challenging for people with low incomes to afford necessities. According to Stats NZ (2023), New Zealand's inflation rate peaked at 7.3 percent in 2022, and in 2023 grocery prices increased by 12.5 percent (Consumer NZ). Because of the increase in prices of basic necessities, at least one in five households struggled with essential costs in 2023, making it hard for people to afford basic needs. The cost-of-living crisis is a challenge to human rights, equity and justice and violates the individual's right to an adequate standard of living.

Aim, Action and System

I wanted to find a way to directly respond to the cost-of-living crisis by helping people get access to the goods they need at a more affordable price. One way I could do this was to support the humanitarian system. The humanitarian system is a network of organisations that work together to help people facing crises like the cost-of-living crisis. These include food banks, charities and non-profit organisations. While these groups may have different roles, they share the same goal of providing basic human needs and reducing suffering. The system is based on values such as human rights and supporting vulnerable populations.

On a local scale, the humanitarian system includes community groups such as the Salvation Army, which can respond quickly to local needs using donations and reselling goods at lower prices. The Salvation Army NZ operates over 60 family stores and 120 community centres that provide services like foodbanks, housing help and counselling. They receive donations, recycle household goods and resell them for cheaper and more affordable prices. The humanitarian system attempts to address the cost-of-living crisis by prioritising immediate needs, such as food, shelter and basic support, while maintaining human dignity.

Therefore, my social action was volunteering at the Salvation Army Family Store, which directly responds to the cost-of-living crisis by helping people access essential goods at more affordable prices. Before doing this, I sent an email to the Salvation Army family store team to get permission to volunteer. While emailing them, I also asked for further information about the types of goods that should and should not be donated for safety reasons and hygiene standards. This was important because it meant I did not bring items they could not use, like broken electricals or stained clothing, which would waste staff time and create disposal costs. It also helped me focus on the most useful items the store could sell quickly to keep prices low for customers. I donated clothes and household items and carried out practical tasks such as organising shelves, cleaning the store and putting price tags on clothing. Before donating, I sorted through my wardrobe and home to find good quality items that were clean, undamaged and still useful, like warm winter clothing, good shoes, kitchenware and bedding. I also thought about what items are most in demand and popular with families, such as children's clothes, jackets and hoodies, basic pots and pans, and towels, so my donation would be more helpful. To increase the amount and range of items, I spoke with my family and friends and asked if they had suitable things they were no longer using. I explained the cost-of-living crisis and how the Family Store helps people, which encouraged them to contribute.

In addition to donating, I then spent four hours at the store volunteering, where I helped organise and clean the store. I also helped to put price tags on items. This is important, because all these tasks are important for the store to be able to run and it also meant that it helped the store focus more on its general operations for the time I was there and do more customer support. The aim of my social action was to support people affected by rising living costs by helping the store operate smoothly and stay accessible for families who rely on it.

[The student included photographs of their work in the Salvation Army store, and screenshots of email between them and the Salvation Army Family Store]

How the action supported the system

My social action supported the humanitarian system by helping the Salvation Army Family Store function more effectively in the short term. Because I volunteered my time, the staff were able to focus on more urgent tasks like helping customers who needed assistance. When I completed tasks such as cleaning and pricing items, it allowed the staff time to rest and recharge, which improved their ability to support people in need. The humanitarian system relies on public donations and volunteers to operate at low cost and high capacity, especially during the cost-of-living crisis when demand increases. The Salvation Army Family Stores depend on good quality donated goods and volunteers to sort, price and display items, which helps keep prices affordable for families. Without steady donations and enough volunteers, the system would struggle to meet needs, shelves would not be stocked, and fewer people could access essential items.

Another impact of my social action was strengthening community giving. By donating items and being visibly involved, I influenced others to consider donating or volunteering as well. This supports the humanitarian system because donations reduce costs for families and reduce environmental waste. It also helps meet the increased demand caused by inflation and rising living costs. This connects to the social studies concept of Beliefs, because the Salvation Army and I share values about helping people in crisis.

My social action of donating and volunteering supported a trusted system that meets basic needs for vulnerable people. The Salvation Army helps over 120,000 people yearly in New Zealand, which makes it a reliable and effective part of the humanitarian system. My involvement helped me better understand how the system works and how community support keeps it functioning.

Evaluation of Suitability:

Although my social action was suitable and manageable as a student, it could have been more effective if I had stayed involved over multiple days or weeks. This would have contributed to longer-term positive outcomes. This relates to the value of commitment because continuing to volunteer would help people going through a hard time during the cost-of-living crisis.

The alternative social action that could have been more suitable in supporting the system could have been by making a fundraiser for those who are in urgent need for support and signing a petition to the government. For example, if I make a fundraiser for those who are going through a rough time from the cost-of-living crisis, I can respond more quickly to the social issue. Although I may not be age appropriate for signing petitions, I can help make a difference and help individual's rights.

By making a fundraiser, I can raise money for people in need and reduce their struggles. Additionally, by signing a petition, it can convince the government to increase minimum wage, allowing everyone to have equal and fair status and rights.

To conclude, some alternative social actions I could have done which were more suitable in supporting the system could have been making a fundraiser for people in poverty and signing a petition to the government to either try lower the cost-of-living crisis or increase individuals' minimum wages.

Grade: Achieved

For Achieved, the student needs to describe a social action undertaken to support or challenge a system.

This includes describing the action, its aim in relation to a selected social issue, and how it supported or challenged a system. Relevant evidence must be included.

In this exemplar, the student has identified a social issue (people's ability to afford essential necessities such as food, housing, transport, and healthcare), considered a connected system (the humanitarian system), and selected an appropriate social action that supports the system in responding to the issue (volunteering and donating goods to the Salvation Army).

The student provides evidence to describe their social action by outlining both the work of the Salvation Army and the specific steps they took. These included researching donation needs, signing up as a volunteer, and completing volunteer work for the organisation. Photographic evidence was also supplied to show that they carried out the action themselves.

The student goes on to connect their actions to supporting the humanitarian system. Their description shows an understanding of the role charities play in offering timely and targeted support at a local level. They explain how their actions helped the Salvation Army continue providing humanitarian assistance, and they recognise the importance of volunteers and donations in enabling charities to operate effectively. They also identify that donating high-quality goods allows charities to sell items at low prices, making them more accessible to people affected by high living costs.

For Merit, the student needed to develop their description into an explanation that made clear how and why their actions affected the humanitarian system. This could have included explaining wider consequences of increased staff capacity, such as improved support during high demand, or how tasks like cleaning and pricing improve the organisation's efficiency. They could also have explained how encouraging community giving contributes to longer-term system sustainability through ongoing donations and volunteer involvement. More specific evidence would also be required to support a stronger explanation.