Public Health Association
AUSTRALIA

Food Security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

Background Paper

This paper provides background information to the Public Health Association of Australia's (PHAA) Food Security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Policy Position Statement, providing evidence and justification for the public health policy position adopted by PHAA and for use by other organisations, including governments and the general public.

Language

Throughout this background paper, 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' is respectfully used to describe the First Peoples of the lands and waters now known as Australia. Where it is part of a title or quote, the term 'Indigenous' is, at times, used to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. We recognise the distinctly different cultures and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples described by this term.

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Summary

1. Food security is a human right, but not all Australians have the same opportunity to access a healthy, culturally appropriate diet.
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have a deep connection to food and food practices as part of a sovereign and intimate relationship with Country. Before colonisation, this maintained food systems and dietary patterns that holistically supported the health and wellbeing of people, communities and Country.
3. The prevalence of food insecurity is unacceptably high in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia.
4. Food insecurity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is an outcome of historical and ongoing colonisation and the systemic inequities it perpetuates across Australia's food and other social systems, significantly affecting their wellbeing outcomes from conception to old age.
5. In some conceptions, food security has six dimensions:
    a. Access: healthy food is accessible in communities, encompassing both physical access and economic access.
    b. Availability: healthy food is available in the community through reliable food supply, year-round.
    c. Agency: individuals and communities have the capacity to choose what foods to eat and make decisions about their food systems.
    d. Utilisation: healthy food is utilised by communities that understand and are empowered to practice good nutrition.
    e. Stability: food supply and security are stable over time and can respond with resilience to interruptions and challenges.
    f. Sustainability: food supply and food systems are sustainable long-term.
6. There have been many inquiries, strategies and plans over the years but very few have been implemented. Policy responses should centre the voices and perspectives of those they impact. For example:
    a. The 2023 Closing the Gap Implementation Plan.
    b. Queensland's Gather + Grow 2023-2032 and the Gather + Grow Action Plan 2023-2026.
    c. The Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory 2021 Food Summit Report.
    d. The National Indigenous Australians Agency National Strategy for Food Security in Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities 2025
7. Actions to improve food security with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples should centre community voices, be designed and delivered in partnership, foster a coordinated approach and take a holistic, systemic view to address and measure food security and its determinants.
8. The PHAA continues to call for urgent and coordinated action with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to improve food security.

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Background

According to Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, food security exists "when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life".[1] Food security is a fundamental human right, which Australians of all backgrounds and across the country are entitled to, with the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights stating "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food".[2] The right to adequate food is not a right to be fed but "a right of people to be given a fair opportunity to feed themselves, now and in the future."[3]

Systemic challenges mean that not all Australians have the same opportunity to exercise this fundamental human right. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are more likely to experience food insecurity, with impacts felt across remote, rural, regional and urban Australia. Food insecurity amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is a direct result of colonisation and the systemic inequities it perpetuates.[4-6]

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have a deep connection to food and food practices as part of a sovereign and intimate relationship with Country.[7] Prior to colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples developed and maintained sustainable food systems with culture, and a deep, sophisticated understanding of Country at their heart. Land management strategies and practices were passed through generations, making sure that groups of people produced nutrient dense food that kept them healthy and connected to Country and their cultures. Food practices, based on seasons, intergenerational knowledge and innovation, supported a reliable, sustainable and healthy diet.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, a holistic and interconnected world-view positions food security as closely aligned with culture, Country and community. The following definition was developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples:[8]

> *"The land and the sea is our food security. It is our right. Food security for us has two parts: Food security is when the food from our ancestors is protected and always there for us and our children. It is also when we can easily access and afford the right non-traditional food for a collective healthy and active life. When we are food secure we can provide, share and fulfil our responsibilities, we can choose good food, knowing how to make choices and how to prepare and use it"*

After British colonisation, the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples from their land, land clearing and introduction of animals and new farming practices disrupted traditional food systems and food production practices that had been passed through generations.[7] The impacts of colonial policies meant that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples became increasingly dependent on introduced foods and a Western dietary pattern.[9] First through government-controlled rations, and later through stores, leading to nourishing traditional foods being increasingly replaced with a greater dependency on energy dense foods and drinks, high in refined carbohydrate, fat and salt.[10-12] Colonial policies were put in place by the Commonwealth that led to economic and cultural poverty for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples adding to the disparity in rights, justice and overall access to a healthy diet and food security.[3] The legacy of colonisation, including low incomes, lack of employment opportunities, and social and housing inequalities perpetuated by the broader system, has manifested in poorer diet-related health outcomes, higher burden-of-disease, and ongoing systemic inequities that continue to contribute to food insecurity amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples today, particularly in remote communities.[4-6]

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This paper describes the public health issue of food insecurity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples of Australia with a focus on remote communities. It also explores the determinants of food insecurity through a six-dimensional food security framework (encompassing availability, access, utilisation, stability, agency and sustainability).[1]

Public health issue

Food security is fundamental to a healthy diet and equity. Research suggests that those experiencing food insecurity are at risk of a range of chronic conditions, including those linked to mental wellbeing, and have poorer diet quality.[13] Food insecurity can contribute to trauma, which is defined as an emotionally painful or distressing experience possibly impacting physical and mental health [14] The trauma of food insecurity may be a single event or continue beyond the period of food insecurity, and is overlaid with stressors, such as social and economic inequality, racism, and high costs of living which can all have long term health consequences.[14]

Food insecurity is experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and non-Indigenous Australians across the nation and exists in urban, regional and remote locations.[15] Recent publications indicate that food insecurity is on the rise across Australia.[16] Food insecurity is generally higher in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, however, with 41% of households experiencing food insecurity due to a lack of money for food in 2022-23;[17] 17% of households were in a severe state of food insecurity, and a further 17% experienced moderate food insecurity. Food insecurity was higher in households with at least one child under the age of 18 (47% v 36%), in remote areas (51% v 40%), and with lower income (66% in lowest income households vs 8% in highest income households.

Food insecurity has been reported as high as 76% in some remote regions.[18,19] While it is acknowledged that food insecurity is pervasive across Australia, and that the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples live in cities and regional centres, the impacts of food insecurity in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is longstanding and requires focussed attention. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities experience greater risks to food insecurity, such as lower income, poorer housing conditions and geographic isolation, and reduced access to services, including food relief, which has a compounding impact on health.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience a burden of disease that is 2.3 times the rate of non-Indigenous Australians with chronic diseases accounting for just over half (51%) of the total disease burden.[20] It is estimated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males born in Australia in 2020-2022 could expect to live 8.7 years less than non-Indigenous males, while for females the gap is 8.2 years.[21] For the most remote parts of Australia, life expectancy is amongst the lowest in the world.[22] Around one-third (34%) of the health gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians was due to social determinants (employment and hours worked, highest non-school qualification, level of schooling completed, housing adequacy and household income).[23] Five of the seven estimated leading contributors to the health gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians relate to some extent to diet: high body mass index, high blood cholesterol, alcohol, high blood pressure, and low fruit and vegetable intake.[20]

Food insecurity can exacerbate several risk factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander remote communities disproportionality experience. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were almost twice as likely as non-Indigenous people to be at risk of anaemia in 2012-13 (rate ratio of 1.9). Overall, the risk of anaemia was higher for people living in remote areas compared with those living in non-remote areas (10.1% compared with 6.9%).[24] Research suggests that poor nutrition and poor supply of healthy

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food contributes to chronic diseases, such as anaemia and other micronutrient deficiencies as well as overweight and obesity, particularly in remote Australia.[25]

The diverse but often overlapping facets of malnutrition (encompassing undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and overweight and obesity), as experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, can have severe consequences as they significantly increase the risk of physical and mental disability and mortality across the life course. Food insecurity is an important factor as many food security coping strategies, including those promoted by governments and food relief services, preference the availability of food and energy over overall nutritional quality.[13,27-30] This contributes to the high prevalence of overweight, obesity, and type 2 diabetes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Such impacts on health can have significant impacts on wellbeing and development and have the potential to entrench disadvantage.[31]

The Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet publishes a National Overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health annually, which should be viewed for the most up to date information.[32] Reviews on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition and on programs and services to improve nutrition and food security are also available.[33,34]

Availability

Food availability

Not all Australians have the same opportunity to choose a healthy diet and achieve food security. The availability, variety and quality of nutritious foods, including fresh fruit and vegetables, are generally more limited in remote community stores compared to major cities.[35,36] This impacts the ability of some communities to follow a healthy diet. These factors increase reliance on shelf-stable, nutrient poor foods high in fat, sugar and salt that are convenient, readily available and easier to transport over long distances to reach remote community.

Availability of traditional foods

Strong culture, values and a connection to the land contribute to the resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and cultures. Traditional foods contribute to physical health as well as play a significant role in cultural, spiritual and emotional health. Strong connectedness with Country and Traditional foods are protective factors for healthy eating and wellbeing.[37] Remote community members have described traditional foods as being protective of food security.[14,38]

Colonisation has an ongoing impact on access to and use of traditional lands and foods, which is shared in both remote and urban communities. However, many communities still engage in traditional food practices, in some as much as everyday.[10,37,39] At the same time, the many different cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have different food utilisation practices and food preferences. Honouring these cultures through food practices and utilisation in alignment with preferences and traditional methods, strengthens food security, sovereignty and utilisation of healthy foods.

Water availability

It is important to acknowledge the ongoing issue of water security, which relates to adequate quantity and quality of water for sustaining livelihoods for many communities across Australia (particularly in remote regions). Australia is a relatively dry continent containing only one percent of the world's available freshwater.[40] There is high variation in rainfall from year to year, which is exacerbated by anthropogenic climate change.[40]

Water availability is crucial for food security in order to maintain hydration, but also to ensure communities have a reliable supply of water to cook with, wash their produce and practice safe food habits in their homes. Further,

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water availability is required for growing food locally, which many remote communities view as an important solution to poor food availability.

Inequitable access to safe and reliable water supplies in remote areas of Australia disproportionately affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It has been estimated that more than 400 remote or regional communities in Australia lack access to good quality drinking water.[41] There are many complex challenges to effectively deliver water supplies in remote areas, including water scarcity, water quality issues, high treatment costs, limited capacity for maintenance of infrastructure, and supply chains impacted by distance, road conditions and limited seasonal access.[41] These challenges also have significant impacts on food insecurity.

Access

Physical access

Access to food stores and transport are important determinants of food security in urban, regional and remote locations. Connectivity between food stores and residential areas compromises food security for people living in urban and regional areas.[42] Transport to food outlets and quality of public transport are strongly and independently associated with food insecurity in urban Australia.[43] In remote communities, families often rely on walking, or private transport, to reach their local food source. Having access to a car can help to support food security by increasing access to stores within and outside the community, as well as traditional foods.[14,38] However, not all members of the community have access to this type of transport. For example, less than half of people living in very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have a registered car.[44] Further, elderly people, people living with a disability or others that may experience mobility issues are likely to experience physical accessibility challenges to food.

Economic access

Comparable data gathered using the Healthy Diets Australian Standardised Affordability and Pricing (HD ASAP) protocol in various metropolitan, rural and regional locations across Australia continually shows healthy diets (based on current dietary guidelines) are cheaper than habitual diets (based on reported dietary intakes).[45,49] Unhealthy foods and alcoholic drinks make up much of the cost of the habitual diet, despite the common perception that an unhealthy diet is cheaper. However, there is inconsistency in food pricing tools used between different jurisdictions across Australia.[50]

Income and the cost of food are key factors influencing food affordability and food choice.[33,38,51] In remote communities incomes are usually low, and the cost of food (and living in general) is high. Mean income levels decline with remoteness, yet the cost of healthy food is consistently higher in very remote communities compared to regional centres and major cities, with an average cost differential of 52% seen in the Northern Territory in 2021.[45,49,52] This trend is consistent in remote communities in Queensland.

Freight charges, challenging retail conditions and reduced economies of scale in small remote communities, amongst others, all contribute to high food costs in remote areas, particularly of fresh fruit and vegetables.[35,52,53] It is important to note that there have been positive developments in store management practices by groups such as Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation (ALPA), Outback, Community Enterprise Queensland and Mai Wiru to address the pricing barriers to food security including freight subsidies and preferential profit margin policies.[10,54]

Assessments of food price and affordability using HD ASAP in remote communities of the Aṉangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara lands and Torres Strait Islands have shown habitual diets cost 24-32% more than healthy diets, with around 60% of the current diet spend coming from discretionary foods and drinks in both areas.[49,55] Both

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habitual and healthy diets were unaffordable in all locations assessed and even more so for welfare dependent families, where habitual diets cost 64% of household income, and healthy diets cost 48%, both well above the affordability benchmark of 30% of income.[49,55] This has been further demonstrated in Central Australia and Cape York, where a healthy diet has been shown to cost 40% and 38% of household social security income, respectively.[18]

Further, there was a higher proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 and over accessing government pension or allowance as their main source of income (52%) compared with non-Indigenous people (25%) in 2014-15.[56] The proportion of people accessing government pension or allowance increased with remoteness.[56]

Income and employment

Poverty is both a cause and effect of social disadvantage, intergenerational trauma and institutional racism, which significantly contribute to food insecurity amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Due to reduced access to and exclusion from educational and economic opportunities, and other inequities resulting from European colonisation, which disrupted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander economic structures, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households have, on average, a weekly gross income which is $250 less than that of non-Indigenous households.[57] More than a quarter (27%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people report running out of money for basic living expenses (food, bills and clothing) in the last 12 months.[58] In 2019, the unemployment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over was four times that of non-Indigenous people.[59-61] These inequities in income and employment contribute to food insecurity within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and this is exacerbated further in remote communities due to even lower incomes and higher cost of food.

In 2018–19, government welfare payments were the main source of personal income for 45% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults aged between 18–64.[62] The average weekly equivalised household income of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults in 2021 was highest in Major cities ($982), and lowest in very remote areas ($459).[62] For comparison, the poverty line (50% of median income, before deducting housing costs) for a single adult in 2019-20 was $489 per week.[63] Households receiving income support are among those facing the highest risk of poverty and are therefore at greatest risk of food insecurity.[63] Accurate measurement of material poverty in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is hampered by the complexity of family structures and income sharing arrangements, all of which likely result in an underestimation of poverty.

In very remote areas, where there are often limited economic opportunities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 16 and over were 5 times more likely to be receiving unemployment payments as their counterparts in major cities.[62] Welfare payments in Australia have not increased substantially despite large increases in costs of living in recent years, and it has been shown that increased government income supports during the COVID-19 pandemic greatly reduced poverty and also increased the affordability of a healthy diet.[45,63,65] Having an adequate income is fundamental to food security and improvements in health and wellbeing.

Utilisation

Housing

Appropriately sized, designed, constructed and maintained houses are essential for the safe storage, preparation and consumption of food, and food security.[66] Overcrowding of homes means more individuals relying on food within one household, which can put additional strain on already tight budgets. Further, overcrowding can put additional strain on health hardware (e.g., fridges and cooktops) required for food preparation and result in more frequent malfunctions. As a result, families experiencing issues related to housing are often reliant on take-

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away, convenience and ready-made foods that can be consumed in the absence of kitchen equipment. Often, these foods are poorer in nutritional quality and more expensive compared to fresh food that needs to be prepared into healthy meals within a kitchen.[12,38]

Housing inequalities and insecurity contributes to poorer food security in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It is estimated that approximately 10% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in overcrowded houses.[59] In many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households, extended families are living together.

Additionally, energy security, including the cost and availability of electricity, has been shown to impact on food security for families living in remote communities, with community members describing the high cost of electricity as often competing with food costs, and the impacts of running out of electricity on food storage and preparation.[14,38]

Nutrition Literacy

Health literacy is fundamental to food security. When communities have the knowledge, skills and other necessary resources, they can prepare and consume foods that support health and wellbeing. However, low health literacy is prevalent in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, stemming from exclusion from mainstream educational, economic and social opportunities as well as past and ongoing dislocation and alienation from traditional cultural practices, and this contributes to malnutrition.[8] To allow for strength-based effective targeted education, consultation with local communities is essential, as food cultures and knowledge is unique to the place and people practicing them. To enable improved health literacy within communities, upskilling of local staff to educate community members in a culturally safe and appropriate manner is required. Although education is critical and can drive demand, it must exist with other strategies driving systematic change as food security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is not due to lack of knowledge, but rather to historical and socioeconomic factors.[33]

Agency

The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* states that Indigenous peoples have the right "to be actively involved in developing and determining health, housing and other economic and social programmes affecting them and, as far as possible, to administer such programmes through their own institutions".[67] This applies to all elements of food security policy and nutrition related strategies. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and voices should be centred in all decisions about food security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Experiences, priorities and actions identified by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples must then be acted on.

Food sovereignty

The 2008 *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* states that "Indigenous peoples have the right of self-determination" and in exercising that right, have the right to autonomy related to all aspects of their lives.[67] This led to the concept of food sovereignty to be recognised as part of food security in Indigenous populations internationally. Food sovereignty is an evolving concept and can be defined as "the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems".[68]

Supporting food sovereignty can improve food security. This is achieved by decreasing dependence on imported foods and revitalising local food systems and practices through spiritual and physical relationships to the lands, waters, biodiversity and Indigenous ecological knowledge.[69]

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If governments do not incorporate the principles of food sovereignty and support the rights of communities to healthy and culturally appropriate food and self-determined food systems, progress towards food security in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will continue to be hindered. The concept of food sovereignty aligns with the Food and Agriculture Organisation's definition of food security, which includes food preferences as a factor for food security to exist.[1]

Sustainability and stability

Food security can only occur when healthy food is consistently available, accessible and utilised. To ensure that this can be safeguarded, it is imperative that resilience is built into food systems so that they can respond to emerging threats (such as climate change). In remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the stability of food security is constantly challenged by weather patterns that interrupt food supply chains, changing political priorities around food access and nutrition and other factors.

Food supply disruptions

Food supply chains in Australia, particularly to regional areas and remote communities, are long and complex. Food needs to travel large distances, which requires long periods of time in transit and many touch points, and consequently there are many points of vulnerability in this supply network.[70]

The long supply chain puts pressure on shelf life and food quality, being further compromised by any delays in delivery, and the associated costs markedly increase the price of food to the consumer.[70,71] Seasonal weather events, natural disasters and infrastructure issues, such as lack of port access, bridge washouts and poor road quality or road closures, mean that disruptions to the remote supply chain are common, which can result in significant costs to community stores and shortages in food supply, impacting on the food security of communities.[70,71] Many communities have only a single transport connection and require costly air freight services in critical situations.[72]

These supply chain disruptions are predicted to increase with climate change, with increases in frequency and severity of heavy rainfall and events such as cyclones, storms and flooding.[72] The effects of this are already being felt in remote Australia, with recent increases in frequency and intensity of rainfall in the NT resulting in the road network experiencing more than double the number of closure days from 2020 to 2021.[72] Further effects of climate change will result in greater impacts to food supply chains, including potential for more prolonged road closures and regional communities being cut-off from food supply for extended periods of time, presenting a key risk to the resilience of community food security.[72]

Climate Change

Climate change poses significant health risks across Australia and will worsen health inequities.[73] For example, flooding events in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities over past years have seen the destruction of homes, and interruption of supply chains in some of Australia's most disadvantaged communities. Similarly, flooding events in urban Australia have seen low-lying low-socioeconomic homes most impacted, which further challenge health and wellbeing outcomes in these communities. Damage to infrastructure (including at household-level e.g., refrigeration), disruptions to food chains, and higher temperatures and extreme weather events can also increase the risk of foodborne illnesses and contamination.[74,75] Such challenges intensify food insecurity.

Extreme weather and remoteness are already significantly contributing to the limited availability of food and the high costs of food in stores in rural and remote areas of Australia. With rising temperatures, the incidence of extreme weather events and rising sea levels will only increase over time, further widening the gap in health in some areas of Australia. Rising sea levels and new average temperatures change the environment and

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therefore also what is possible to grow. Rising sea levels and extreme weather events also force people to leave their homes to escape to more liveable areas. This will soon be a reality for peoples living on many of the Torres Strait Islands, further changing the food systems and their access to traditional foods, as for those living in desert communities which are seeing longer, hotter and drier summers, and scarcity of traditional bush foods. Climate change is already affecting availability, access, utilisation, stability and sustainability of food production, therefore posing a significant threat to current and future food security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Policy options

A wide range of policies impact food security, including employment, education, housing, climate change, water security, agriculture and transport infrastructure amongst others. However, this paper focuses on policies that impact food security, including availability, access, utilisation and stability, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. The following are relevant policy documents since 2020.

There have been numerous calls for strategies to achieve equity in the availability and costs of healthy foods, including by the National Nutrition Networks Conference,[76] the Close the Gap National Indigenous Health Equality Summit,[77] the Australia 2020 Summit,[78] and from Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs), such as Central Australian Aboriginal Congress Aboriginal Corporation,[79] Miwatj Health Aboriginal Corporation,[80] and Apunipima Cape York Health Council [81] through their food security position statements.

Policies that improve food security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples should centre community voices, be co-designed and delivered in partnership, foster a coordinated approach and take a holistic, systemic view to address and measure food security and its determinants.

Commonwealth Closing the Gap Annual Report 2023 and Implementation Plan 2024

This is the second Commonwealth Annual Report under the National Agreement and the third Commonwealth Implementation Plan.[82] The Annual Report assesses the delivery of the 2023 Commonwealth Implementation Plan, whilst the 2024 Implementation Plan outlines the Commonwealth's strategic priorities for Closing the Gap over the next year.

The development of the National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations Communities is underway and will continue into 2024. The Commonwealth allocated $11.8 million for strategy development and early implementation to support remote Australia.[82]

Commonwealth Closing the Gap Implementation Plan 2023

The Commonwealth Closing the Gap Implementation Plan was released in 2023 in response to the Commonwealth Closing the Gap Annual Report 2022.[83] This implementation plan outlines the Commonwealth's strategic priorities and efforts to close the gap over 12 to 18 months. A strength of the implementation plan is that it recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples need to be empowered and share decision-making authority with governments reflecting the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020.[84]

The implementation plan mentions that developing a National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations Communities and identifying areas for immediate implementation would help address food insecurity in remote communities. The strategy will be developed from 2023 to 2025. Consultation on the National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations Communities will begin in 2024 to refine the details and identify areas for immediate implementation.[85]

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Australian Food Story: Feeding the Nation and Beyond 2023

The report from the 2023 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture Inquiry into food security in Australia was released in November 2023.[86,87] Overarching is the development of a comprehensive National Food Plan, appointment of a Minister for Food with responsibility to develop and implement this Plan, and appointment of a National Food Council to advise the Minister for Food (specified to be supported by expert committees covering sectors including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities). Two recommendations pertain specifically to food security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities:[87]

1. In development of a National Food Plan: recognise the special circumstances of remote communities in the food supply chain, decentralise food distribution in regions with remote communities, acknowledge community stores as an essential service, provide subsidies for remote community stores to improve affordability of fresh food, and review the Remote Air Services Subsidy Scheme to prioritise efficient and affordable delivery of fresh produce.
2. Assess progress towards implementing the recommendations from the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs' 2020 report on food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities.

Queensland Gather + Grow Strategy 2023-2032 and Action plan 2023-2026

Gather + Grow 2023-2032 is the Queensland Government's long term, multi-strategic response to food insecurity in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with an initial focus in the Far North.[88] Gather + Grow has been developed by Health and Wellbeing Queensland in co-leadership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and through continuous engagement with local, state and federal government agencies and stakeholders across a diverse range of sectors, including industry, universities and non-for-profit.

The goal of Gather + Grow is to ensure a healthy food supply in remote communities that is stable and resilient through healthy food availability, accessibility and utilisation. The first Gather + Grow Action Plan (2023-2026) is priming remote food systems for change by working in partnerships with 17 government agencies across all tiers, and with communities, to understand the opportunities and test solutions.[88] This will be delivered through 23 actions across four key priority areas: logistics and supply chain, local food production, healthy communities and healthy homes.

Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT) 2021 Food Summit Report: Food Security in the Northern Territory

In 2020, AMSANT, in partnership with Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, Northern Territory Council of Social Services and Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatara Women's Council, undertook the Food Summit project, working with Aboriginal communities and other key stakeholders to identify and develop potential policy and program ideas to help address determinants of food security for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory.[89] This report is the result of wide consultation with Aboriginal community members and service providers, culminating in a two day Food Summit forum with 120 delegates in Alice Springs where community-led key policy recommendations were developed. Many recommendations are applicable to improving food security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples nationally, including:

- increased investment in culturally-appropriate social housing,
- increased social welfare payments,
- investment in community-controlled local food production,

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- investigating a subsidy to improve healthy food affordability for remote communities,
- investment in safe, acceptable and affordable water and power, and
- upgrading transport infrastructure for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and potential food production regions.[89]

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan (NATSIHP) 2021-2031

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-31 provides a national policy framework to improve the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.[90] Embedded in a national health policy for the first time are the social and cultural determinants of health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. This includes food security and access to nutritious food. The plan recognises that food security is particularly challenging for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote communities.

One of the objectives is to take action to improve food security. Solutions will need to consider issues related to supply, access, affordability, demand and barriers to consumption, and stores need to be supported to act as an important community service that is pivotal to community members' health and wellbeing.[90] Specific strategies to improve food security, including in urban, rural and remote areas, need to be embedded in the implementation plan.

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs' Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities (2020)

The Inquiry was initiated in response to rising prices in remote stores during the COVID-19 pandemic.[86] It was also a response to long-standing concerns regarding the availability and affordability of nutritious food in remote communities.

Sixteen recommendations were made to the Australian Government, who supported, or provided in-principle support, for 10 of the 16 recommendations.[86] This included a strategy for food security and nutrition for remote First Nations communities, live price monitoring tool, national licensing, a focus on local distribution and food production and grants to support community stores as well as other measures to address store governance and management.

National Strategy for Food Security in Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities

Building on the recommendation from the previous Inquiry, this 10-year Strategy was developed by the Australian Government, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Health peak organisations, and state and territory governments.[91] Its vision is that "It is the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living on Country and in remote communities to be healthy and food secure", with a stated goal to "Achieve equitable food security for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with a focus on addressing social determinants of health".

This Strategy identifies seven pillars of food security: Country and Culture; Health and Nutrition; Housing, Infrastructure, and Environmental Health; Families and Communities; Remote Retail; Supply Chains; and Healthy Economies. A governing body will oversee implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Recommended action

Empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to share decision-making authority in the co-design, implementation and evaluation of policies and place-based programs in alignment with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and shared decision making are essential in the planning, implementation and evaluation of policies and programs. Communities should be engaged as equal partners that share power and decision making with Governments and other institutions to deliver

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outcomes that will benefit communities. This can be delivered through aligning ways of working with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap's four Priority Reforms:[84]

1. Formal partnerships and shared decision making
2. Building the community-controlled sector
3. Transforming government organisations
4. Shared access to data and information at a regional level

Coordinate and integrate cross-sectoral policies, priorities and programs that address food security and its determinants

- Food security and its determinants often sit across many sectors which requires a collaborative, joined-up approach and often, new networks and ways of working in partnerships. For example, employment, education, housing, climate change, water security, agriculture and transport infrastructure amongst others. Improving the co-ordination of these efforts, across sectors, towards collective impact and shared goals around closing the gap through food security will give communities the best chance of success.

Address food security and its determinants in the implementation of climate change strategies.

- While climate change poses a threat to the ecosystem, food production and food security, there is also opportunity for Australia to be innovative and prioritise sustainable solutions that are led by and benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, particularly those living in rural and remote areas. Responses to climate change should include collaboration, cross-sectoral knowledge exchange, and partnerships, including partnerships with communities to understand and implement sustainable land management and food production practices.
- The National Health and Climate Strategy considers food security as a priority to improve the health outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.[92] Under Action 3.6 (supporting leadership of First Nations communities on health and climate change), the Australian Government will work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to support leadership on action and investment in climate change adaptation.[92] It is recommended that actions that respond to climate change include a food security lens, and vice versa, in alignment with Action 3.6 of the National Health and Climate Strategy.[92]

Improve affordability of food through measures to increase income and reduce the cost of healthy food, particularly in rural and remote areas.

- Income and the cost of food are key factors influencing food affordability and choice.[33,51] Both should be addressed simultaneously to have a meaningful impact on food security. To address income in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, action to increase social security payments and improve economic, employment and training opportunities is recommended. Further, a variety of mechanisms to address the high cost of food should be addressed. Several Supermarket Inquiries are currently investigating this issue. Some strategies could include regular monitoring of food price, considering the feasibility of food subsidies particularly for remote regions and/or improving the resilience and efficiency of supply chains to reduce the cost of food freight. These issues are particularly relevant for remote communities that experience a higher cost of living and usually have fewer employment opportunities.

Implement recommendations and report on outcomes of various recent inquiries relevant to food security.

- Actions related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander food security specifically, or actions that are likely to benefit the food security of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, should be implemented as a matter of priority.

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- The Australian Government and other relevant sectors implement recommendations that were made by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs' Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities. Sixteen recommendations were made and the Australian Government supported, or provided in-principle support, for 10 recommendations.[99] This included a national food security strategy, local food distribution and food production, and grants to support community stores amongst other measures.[93]
- Further, several of the recommendations from the Inquiry into Food Security in Australia would be expected to have positive impacts on food security in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including those living in remote communities. For example, Recommendation 35 encourages implementation of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs' Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities.
- Greater transparency is required in the implementation of food security policies and programs, including monitoring and evaluation. Reports should be publicly available so others can learn and build upon the results of the policy and program. Additionally, monitoring and evaluation should be informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's cultural and community perspectives on food security to strengthen self-determination.

Improve monitoring and surveillance on food security and its determinants to enable better access to culturally appropriate and healthy foods for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

- Infrequent national surveys with one- or two-item food insecurity measures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics have led to quickly outdated national data, and potential underestimated of food insecurity severity, while food insecurity data collected by other researcher or not-for-profit agencies often utilise inconsistent measures and methodologies and may not have representative samples.[94]
- A routine and comprehensive effort to understand the extent of food insecurity in Australia, including its distribution, severity, determinants and lived experience is recommended. This includes using more comprehensive and culturally appropriate tools to measure food insecurity,[95] regularly monitoring the cost of food, especially healthy food in line with the Australian Dietary Guidelines,[96] against CPI, or other measures that can be used to highlight disparities and inform decision making. The health, social and economic impacts of food insecurity, over both the short- and long-term, must also be captured quantitatively and qualitatively.

Adopted 2012, revised 2019 and 2025

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