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Re: National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations Communities

The Remote Food Security Project team, a collaborative conducting food security research in partnership with remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations Communities. Our collaborative comprises members, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members, from Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations in Queensland, Apunipima Cape York Health Council, and the Northern Territory, Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, and Australian and International public health academics.

This submission is informed by the findings from the Remote Food Security research project and reports on published and unpublished data generated from this National Health and Medical Research Council funded study. Given the inclusion of unpublished data, we ask that you please contact us if there is a need to make any of this public.

We focus our response on the priorities and solutions to improve food security in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, identified by community members and leaders from remote communities in Cape York and Central Australia who have been involved in this project.

Thank you for considering our response. For further information please contact:

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Response to consultation on the National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations Communities

Our response to the consultation process and the Discussion Paper is presented in three parts: A. Remote Food Security Project overview, B. Response to the Focus Areas included in the Discussion Paper, and C. Key findings from the Remote Food Security project including community-led priorities.

A. The Remote Food Security Project

The Remote Food Security Project¹ is a collaborative research study that resulted from a call to action by Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations; Apunipima Cape York Health Council in Queensland and Central Australian Aboriginal Congress in the Northern Territory, who identified food security in remote communities as a priority for action. Together with The University of Queensland, a co-designed research project was implemented to determine community-led solutions to improve food security in Cape York and Central Australia.

A two-year phase of local data collection (2021-2022) with eight remote communities in Cape York and Central Australia included testing the impact of a discount on healthy food on the diet quality of women and children and healthy food affordability, interviews with parents and carers to learn about the lived experience of food insecurity², and a photovoice study³ to identify priorities and solutions for improving food security. Building on the research phase, community leaders determined the priorities for improving food security in their community. In February 2023 representatives from 10 communities across both regions came together at a Knowledge Exchange where they determined collective priorities and solutions to inform a community-led framework to improve food security in Cape York and Central Australia.

Findings from the Remote Food Security Project, including videos where you can hear directly from community members about the priorities and solutions for improving food security, can be accessed on the project webpage: <https://public-health.uq.edu.au/remote-food-security>

B. Response to the Focus Areas of the Discussion Paper

In the following sections we report on how the evidence generated from the Remote Food Security Project aligns with the Focus Areas of the Discussion Paper. We have also highlighted where there was direct alignment with a Potential Action

1. Focus Area: Country

Remote Food Security Project evidence

Access to traditional foods and **local food production** were important factors relating to food security throughout the project.

Through the interviews and photovoice study conducted with parents/carers of young children, **access to traditional foods** was raised as supporting food security, in addition to holding cultural and spiritual

significance. At the Knowledge Exchange community representatives determined that traditional food access was a priority for action, with one proposed solution being consultation between government and communities about legislation around traditional foods. In addition to traditional foods for commercial use and/or local enterprise, access to traditional foods for household consumption was considered a priority; this latter point does not appear to be an explicit focus the Discussion Paper. Photovoice participants described the benefit of traditional foods being free however that resources, such as cars, were needed to attain it and suggested community transport and local infrastructure as potential resources to support traditional food access.

Local food production was one potential solution that could help to address both the cost of healthy food, and the supply and range of quality foods in communities, both of which were identified in the top five priority areas for action to improve food security. Various types of local food production were suggested, including fruit and vegetable production, livestock, abattoirs and butchering, and bakeries. Community representatives described the multiple potential benefits of local food production which included increased access to fresh food, local employment opportunities and empowerment of communities.

2. Focus Area: Health

Remote Food Security Project evidence

‘Education- health promotion’ was identified as one of the top five priority areas to improve food security at the Knowledge Exchange. Proposed solutions to address this priority included; nutrition education from day care through to the end of high school, more health promotion in community that targets broad community, and community champions for healthy eating.

In line with the Potential Action to **‘strengthen the provision of comprehensive and culturally appropriate nutrition and life skills education’**, community representatives felt that nutrition education should be throughout schooling, as part of the national curriculum. They determined this should include education about traditional foods, and also life skills such as cooking, budgeting and tobacco and gambling control, which they saw as tied to supporting adult education in general in communities. This health promotion and life skills education throughout all schooling was discussed as a way to address intergenerational cycles, and it was hoped information would flow from children to parents to increase whole family health. Community representatives also felt there needed to be culturally appropriate frameworks in primary school to empower health promoting life practices.

As well as supporting community agency, health promotion/education ties to employment, income and training, another key priority area determined by community representatives. The Potential Actions which relate to building a local health and nutrition workforce, would support this priority by providing training, employment and career opportunities for community members.

3. Focus Area: Housing

Remote Food Security Project evidence

Participants of the photovoice project described **overcrowding, and house maintenance issues**, as being linked to food insecurity. Community representatives at the Knowledge Exchange determined **housing and house maintenance** as a priority for improving food security. Proposed solutions to address housing issues included; support around accessing housing and maintenance, more frequent visits from public health officers, including environmental health, and support from environmental health officers for animal control. Community representatives also proposed the solution of having local people being trained to repair houses, which aligns with the Potential Action to **‘support the establishment and resourced delivery of an effective, locally-based First Nations housing maintenance workforce’**. Additionally, photovoice participants described the impacts of not having a fridge on food storage, providing evidence to support the Potential Action to **‘support remote housing providers to co-design with communities the provision and maintenance of food storage and cooking facilities at appropriate standards for food security’**.

Energy security (the cost and availability of power) was also identified as being linked to food security, with participants of the photovoice project and lived experience interviews describing power as being expensive and often competing with other costs of living (such as food), and the impacts of the power running out on food storage and preparation/cooking. Participants talked about the continuation of the power rebate that exists in Cape York as a solution to improving power affordability. At the Knowledge Exchange, community representatives identified power and gas a priority area impacting on food security. Proposed solutions included; making power more affordable, increasing solar and/or wind power in communities, good insulation of houses and back-up generators. Project evidence supports the Potential Action to **‘provide affordable, safe and reliable electricity in all remote community housing, with implementation based on need not population size’**.

Water quality and quantity was also determined by community representatives at the Knowledge Exchange to be a priority area for improving food security, particularly for communities with greater concerns regarding the quality/quantity of their water supply, with potential solutions including the use of rainwater tanks, and filters to improve water quality and reduce excess minerals. Project evidence supports the Potential Action to **‘provide affordable, safe and reliable water for all households in remote communities, with implementation based on need not population size’**.

4. Focus Area: Families and Community Infrastructure

Remote Food Security Project evidence

In terms of infrastructure to support food security community members and representatives identified solutions of **improving housing and house maintenance, improving energy security and addressing water quality and quantity** (all described under Focus Area: Housing).

Additionally, **car and road condition** and **access to transport** was identified as a priority (further described under Focus Area: Supply chains) to improve food security. This priority area encompasses

aspects that would benefit both personal/household (physical) access to food, and the supply of food into communities. Across the project, sealing of unsealed roads was discussed as having a benefit both for individuals/families to travel to and from the nearest regional centres to access a greater range of more affordable food, and to improve the supply of food into community stores, particularly those with very poor road condition and those affected by seasonal weather impacts. Sealing of roads was also seen as a solution that would result in less wear and tear on personal vehicles, reducing costs incurred to families, contributing to overall improvements in living costs. Increased access to cars/transport was also seen as a way to support traditional food access. Community representatives also proposed a solution of community owned transport for the purpose of accessing food.

In terms of community-based services/programs providing food, community representatives supported the strategy of more healthy foods, and less unhealthy foods, being available in stores and schools, which relates to the Focus Areas: Health, Stores and Supply Chains.

5. Focus Area: Stores

Remote Food Security Project evidence

Data collecting during the project supports previous evidence that food is unaffordable in remote communities. A family of six in Central Australia and Cape York, receiving social security income, would need to spend 40% and 38% of their household income respectively, to buy enough healthy food for a fortnight.⁴ Expenditure above 25% of income is considered to result in 'food stress'⁵ and above 30% is considered unaffordable.⁶ Project data shows that food is even more unaffordable for families in remote communities compared to those in the closest regional towns (33% in Alice Springs and 31% in Cairns).⁴

Healthy food affordability was raised consistently throughout the project as a priority area for addressing food insecurity. Participants, community leaders and representatives all spoke of the impact of the cost of food in communities on food security. Community representatives at the Knowledge Exchange proposed solutions including government subsidies on food or freight to help address prices. With regards to stores they proposed vouchers for healthy food, incentives to shop locally, healthy and affordable meal packs. They also discussed community management of stores with store profits being reinvested back into community. Local food production was also discussed as a solution to help address to cost of food in communities, as well as improving the supply and range of quality foods.

In terms of **health promotion**, community representatives at the Knowledge Exchange supported the strategy of more healthy foods, and less unhealthy foods, being available in stores and schools, which relates to the Focus Areas: Health, Stores, Supply Chains and Families and Community Infrastructure.

6. Focus Area: Supply Chains

Remote Food Security Project evidence

Given the strong focus on **healthy food affordability** identified throughout the project, it is acknowledged that action to improve supply chains will likely work to address food costs. The community identified solutions related to this Focus Area, also relate to the Focus Areas of Stores and Families and Community Infrastructure.

Community representatives at the Knowledge Exchange determined '**car and road condition and access to transport**' as one of the top five priority areas to be addressed to improve food security. This priority area encompasses aspects that would benefit both personal/household (physical) access to food, and the supply of food into communities. In line with the Potential Action to '**Develop a long-term cross-government investment plan to upgrade road, air and sea transport infrastructure that support food security in remote First Nations communities**', community representatives supported investment in infrastructure such as sealing roads and building bridges (described further under Focus Area: Families and Community Infrastructure).

7. Focus Area: Healthy Economies

Remote Food Security Project evidence

In particular, employment and income were identified as having a significant impact on food security throughout the project. Community representatives at the Knowledge Exchange identified **employment, income and training** as three priority areas that needed to be considered together, and determined this to be, collectively, one of the top five priorities requiring action to improve food security.

In terms of proposed solutions, community representatives felt that an increase to **social security income** was needed to match the increased costs of living in remote communities. They also expressed that income should be increased in a way that does not detract from people seeing the value in working in jobs in community. Community representatives also described challenges in the process of obtaining Blue/Ochre cards, which prevents some people from gaining **employment**, and they felt that more culturally responsive processes for this would assist. **Income assistance** to manage cost of living pressures including subsidies for power, rent and food, and disaster payments to deal with the impacts of wet season on food supply (in affected communities) were also proposed as solutions.

With regards to **training**, community representatives felt there should be adult education and training programs to support employment skills, and that training should lead to employment. Community representatives also determined that there should be jobs available for school leavers.

Solutions proposed to support community members with financial management included using existing platforms to assist with money matters and financial planning and strategies to support smoking cessation. Community representatives also suggested having free wifi available in communities, as a resource to support administration related to **training, income and employment**.

8. Focus Area: Policies, Practice and Governance

Remote Food Security Project evidence

The project particularly supports privileging the voices and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in communities. We believe that the way we have operated is relevant to how Government might work with governance groups and ‘**community-based Food Security Workforces**’.

The Remote Food Security Project ensured Indigenous leadership and decision-making at every level of project governance. In each community the project worked with Community Advisory Groups who provided important guidance and support to the research team on how the project was conducted in their community including engagement, cultural and community governance, protocols and feedback processes. Additionally, local community research assistants were engaged in each community to also provide guidance on cultural and community governance, and to support the research team with participant recruitment and engagement, consent processes and data collection.

C. Key findings from the Remote Food Security Project

Remote Food Security Project: Baseline results

Baseline data⁴ was collected across eight remote communities, with 477 pregnant and breastfeeding women and children aged six months to five years, from 294 households.

1. Affordability of a healthy diet

Food was unaffordable for residents receiving social security income and was higher than the regional town centres of Alice Springs and Cairns. A family would have to spend approximately 40% of their income on a healthy food basket in Central Australia and 38% in Cape York. Expenditure above 25% of household income indicates food stress⁵ and above 30% is considered unaffordable.⁶

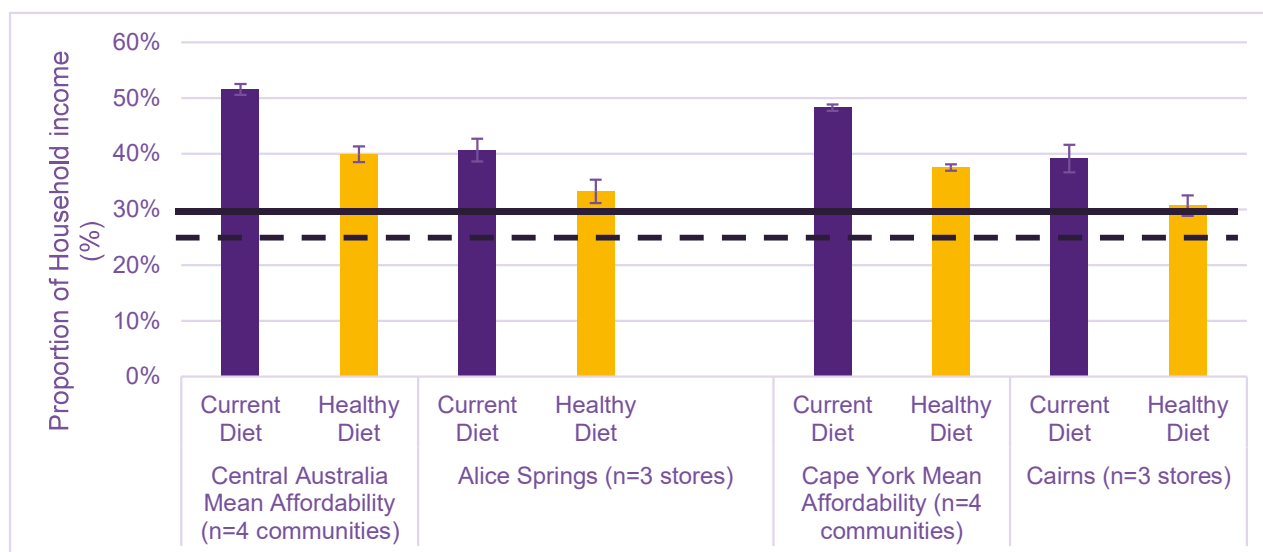


Figure 1. Affordability of current and healthy diets for families receiving social security income only in Central Australian and Cape York communities, compared with the nearest major centres.

2. Food security prevalence

Three out of four families (76%) reported experiencing food insecurity. This is higher than the most recent national statistics which reported 31% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities to be food insecure.⁷

Table 1. Food security status of participant households in Central Australian and Cape York communities.

	Food security status (% of families)	Degree of food security (% of families)
Food secure	24%	High food security 24%
Food insecure	76%	Marginal food security 28%
		Low food security 20%
		Very low food security 28%

3. Diet quality of women and children

Food insecurity impacts the ability to consume a diet that supports health and wellbeing. The diet reported for women and children did not meet the Australian Dietary Guidelines recommendations. Children under five years were meeting the recommended intake for most food groups, except for vegetables. However, pregnant and breastfeeding mothers reported not eating enough of most food groups (fruit, vegetables, grains and dairy).

Table 2. Reported intake compared with the Australian Dietary Guideline (ADG) recommended intakes, in Central Australian and Cape York communities, by age group.

	Children < 2 years		Children 2-5 years		Pregnant & breastfeeding women	
Food Group	Serves, mean (SD) n= 108	ADG serves	Serves, mean (SD) n= 202	ADG serves	Serves, mean (SD) n=161	ADG serves
Vegetables	1.3 (0.9)	0.4-3.0	1.4 (1.0)	2.5-4.5	1.8 (1.3)	5.0-7.5
Fruit	1.0 (0.9)	0.07-0.5	1.8 (1.3)	1.0-1.5	1.1 (1.1)	2.0
Grain	3.1 (1.6)	2.5-4.0	3.8 (1.2)	4.0	4.9 (1.9)	8.5-9.0
Meat	1.1 (0.6)	0.5-1.0	1.5 (0.5)	1.0-1.5	3.1 (1.3)	2.5-3.5
Dairy	2.0 (1.6)	1.0-1.5	2.4 (1.4)	1.5-2.0	1.9 (1.4)	2.5
SSB	0.3 (0.4)	0.0	0.5 (0.6)	0.0	0.8 (0.9)	0.0
Discretionary	1.9 (1.4)	0.0	3.1 (1.5)	0.0-1.0	3.6 (1.7)	0.0-2.5

Note: Green cells indicate participants were on average meeting the recommended intakes, yellow they were close to meeting, and red they were far from meeting recommended intakes.

Remote Food Security Project: Community-led framework

Community representatives identified five priority areas and a number of potential solutions to address these priorities:

- Healthy food prices
- Supply and range of quality foods
- Car and road condition, and access to transport
- Income, employment and training
- Education- health promotion.

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