

## Submission into the issue of food prices and food security in remote Indigenous communities

### House Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs

July 2020

#### Background

The Western Australian Council of Social Service is pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the House Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs inquiry into the issue of food prices and food security in remote Indigenous communities. This submission has been prepared with the WA Food Relief Planning Group.

WACOSS is the peak body for the community services sector in Western Australia and works to create an inclusive, just and equitable society. We advocate for social and economic change to improve the wellbeing of Western Australians, and to strengthen the community services sector that supports them. WACOSS is part of a network consisting of National, State and Territory Councils of Social Service, who advance the interests of people on low incomes and made vulnerable by the systems in place.

WACOSS has provided policy and sector support to the charity food sector in Western Australia for almost twenty years, enabled by Lotterywest grants. In 2017, in response to increasing demand for food relief, Lotterywest funded WACOSS to work with the sector to identify opportunities to improve the coordination and effectiveness of the provision of charity food. The first stage was a system-wide analysis of the Western Australian food relief system with extensive consultation throughout the state. The [WA Food Relief Framework Report](#) (the Report, summary also attached) was launched in 2019 with the vision of “securing the basic right for every person in Western Australia to be food secure, with support from all sectors of the community”. The Food Relief Framework Working Group (the Working Group) was established to provide leadership and guidance for ongoing implementation of the recommendations. Members of the Working Group was by invitation and nomination, with the focus on bringing new perspectives and innovative responses to an issue that continues to escalate.

The Working Group also invited the State Government of Western Australia to lead a partnership with the commercial and not for profit sectors to address food insecurity. The advantages to government to normalise involvement and enhance leadership in this space are abundant, given that food insecurity is an issue that intersects with many ministerial portfolios and agency service areas. The Working Group presented the proposition that food relief needs to have high level government leadership to WA Premier McGowan, to ensure the improving health and wellbeing of all Western Australians. The Premier nominated Minister for Community Services, the Honourable Simone McGurk, to spearhead this area, appropriate as food relief aligns with her responsibilities across the community services portfolio. In February 2020, Premier Mark McGowan hosted the strategic Food

Relief Roundtable where all levels of government, community services, and the commercial sector were asked to consider their contribution to ensuring food security for all Western Australians.

The Working Group membership has expanded in response to the issues raised at the Roundtable, and now includes expanded government representation from Department Premier and Cabinet and WA Local Government Association, in addition to Departments of Communities and Health. The Regional Chambers of Commerce and Curtin University are also represented alongside key players in the food charity sector.<sup>1</sup> Targeted discussions have been held with the major supermarket retailers and the Freight and Logistics Council of WA outside of the Working Group as well.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic the Working Group's agendas have been re-focused towards planning, as we urgently adapted and targeted our strategic efforts. This includes establishing a Food Relief Clearinghouse Working Group that monitors and connects food relief supplies with community priorities and logistics. Our levels of coordination and collaboration, to respond to food insecurity across people and places because of the pandemic in Western Australia, are regarded as ground breaking.

### **Food as a human right**

Human rights-focused approaches have the potential to address the impact of government action or inaction, including the structural causes, not just the symptoms, of social inequities. Article 25.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights sets out the right to food, 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, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.*

Enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Article 11 [5], consenting nation states are obligated to respect, protect and fulfil their commitments. Australia ratified the ICESCR in 1975.<sup>2</sup>

A sense of urgency to address food insecurity is equally explicit in the Global Sustainable Development Goals, which seek actions to realise human rights by 2030, and are determined to end poverty and hunger, in all their forms and dimensions. Goal 2.1 has a target "to end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round."<sup>3</sup>

### **Food insecurity**

Food insecurity is responsible for a growing social, health and economic burden in Australia, largely driven by inadequate income and/or entrenched financial hardship.

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<sup>1</sup> St Vincent de Paul, The Salvation Army, Foodbank WA, Oz Harvest, Second Bite

<sup>2</sup> Pollard, C.M. and S. Booth. (2019) Food Insecurity and Hunger in Rich Countries—It Is Time for Action against Inequality. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health*, 16(10). pii: E1804. doi: 10.3390/ijerph16101804

<sup>3</sup> [United Nations, 'Goal 2: Zero Hunger', \*Sustainable Development Goals\*](#)

Food security is broadly defined as existing when all people, at all times, have sufficient food to meet their needs. Ideally, this means that the food is safe, nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate and available in socially acceptable ways. Food security is underpinned by four pillars: 1) food availability, 2) access, 3) utilisation, and 4) stability.<sup>4</sup>

Food availability is about the supply of food to the community and the commercial systems of access to that food. Availability considers more than the quantity of food but includes the quality and range of foods available.<sup>5</sup> Availability is also influenced by geography and population. For example, in Western Australia the areas of lowest population density also have a higher proportion of Aboriginal residency, 8.4% in remote areas compared with 1.7% in the metropolitan.

Access refers to having economic and physical resources to obtain appropriate foods for a nutritious diet, utilisation is knowledge of basic nutrition and cooking skills, and stability refers to continued access that can withstand climatic or economic disasters or seasonal events. Adequate sanitation and access to housing and health hardware, for example, working stoves, fridges, safe water and utilities, is also imperative to food security.

Food security increases with remoteness in Australia.<sup>6</sup> Regional and remote communities are a third more likely to experience food insecurity than those living in capital cities.<sup>7</sup> Aboriginal people and families in particular, who make up 3 per cent of the WA population, are another group known to experience significantly higher levels of food insecurity, across both the metropolitan and regional and remote areas.<sup>8</sup> Recent studies on the prevalence of food insecurity amongst regional and remote Western Australians found that children were especially vulnerable.<sup>9</sup>

The prevalence and severity of food insecurity in Australia is not routinely measured. Food charity organisations report an incidence of 18% of food insecurity across Australia. They also report high and increasing demand for food relief in remote areas, and say that they are currently unable to meet this demand.

At a minimum, the prevalence and extent of food insecurity should be monitored. The USDA food security surveillance system's 18 item questionnaire is recommended for use in Australia. The high level findings of the Framework found that food insecurity is rarely an emergency. Instead, it is much more likely to be entrenched and periodic over a longer period, with limited pathways out. Therefore, the routine measurement of food insecurity is a priority to guide effective strategy.

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<sup>4</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2006) *Food Security*. FAO's Agriculture and Development Economics Division (ESA),

<sup>5</sup> Pollard CM et al (2014) 'Geographic factors as determinants of food security: a Western Australian food pricing and quality study', *Asia Pac J Clin Nutr.*,23(4):703-13 doi: 10.6133/apjcn.2014.23.4.12.

<sup>6</sup> Landrigan TJ, Kerr DA, Dhaliwal SS, Pollard CM. Protocol for the Development of a Food Stress Index to Identify Households Most at Risk of Food Insecurity in Western Australia. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2018;16(1):79. Published 2018 Dec 29. doi:10.3390/ijerph16010079

<sup>7</sup> [oz harvest](#), op cit

<sup>8</sup> Health Infonet, 2018, *Review of nutrition amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People*

<sup>9</sup> Godrich, S., et al 2017, 'Prevalence of socio-demographic predictors of food insecurity among regional and remote Western Australian children' *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*

Food insecurity can result in diet-related avoidable diseases for Aboriginal people. Infants, children and the elderly are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity and inappropriate dietary intake. Food insecurity results in delayed growth and development for children.

Food insecurity was a critical issue across remote communities prior to COVID-19, however the pandemic has only exacerbated these issues. People living in remote communities experience very low incomes while also paying amongst the highest food prices in the state. These communities also lack robust access to charity food programs unlike those in regional and metropolitan communities. Furthermore, COVID-19 has shown us remote communities are critically vulnerable when commercial supermarket systems are hit with panic buying and other system disruptions. There is much merit in supporting the capacity of the charity food system to provide subsidised access to food while ensuring remote community food access through multiple systems.

Unlike in other jurisdictions, there is no comprehensive evaluation systems to map, monitor and measure the need for, or impact of, community stores or food relief services in Western Australia.

#### **Recommendation 1:**

Federal and state governments establish a reliable routine monitoring and surveillance system for food insecurity, that encompasses remote Indigenous communities.

#### **Comparative pricing**

Previous parliamentary inquiries into food prices in Aboriginal communities have concluded that food costs were higher in remote communities due to the transport logistics of servicing relatively small communities in isolated geographical locations.<sup>10</sup>

Many of the stores servicing remote Indigenous communities of less than 100 people operate more as an 'essential service' than as a 'viable business'. This is reflected by community ownership of these stores, rather than as privately-held businesses. The challenges these retailers experience stem from remoteness, lack of population density, issues with food supply transport logistics, and multiple and small disparate communities.

*Outback Stores* is a wholly Commonwealth- owned company and is currently under the Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio, and thirteen *Outback Stores* operate in WA

There is currently no routine comparative pricing of food across Western Australia. A survey of all community store managers in WA in 2010 found freight costs and irregular deliveries contributed to high prices and a limited range of foods. Poor store infrastructure, compromised cold chain logistics, and commonly occurring power outages affected food quality.

Store managers in remote community stores in WA report that freight costs, irregular deliveries, compromised cold chain logistics and transportation inefficiencies contribute to the high cost, poor quality and limited range of food available. One remote community store manager reported that 'an

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<sup>10</sup> Pollard, CM, Savage, V., Landrigan, T., Hanbury, A, and Kerr, D. (2015). Food Access and Cost Survey, Department of Health, Perth, Western Australia.

order of \$2,500 worth of food costs \$2,000 to transport...a ridiculous price'. Factors driving higher prices in remote communities remain predominantly anecdotal observations in recent times.

#### **Recommendation 2:**

Federal and state governments establish a reliable routine system for measuring food and comparing the cost of food in remote communities, and that includes an analysis of the factors driving elevated prices when these exist.

#### **Food stress**

Developed in 2018, the Food Stress Index combines multiple socioeconomic data sets, which are designed as a measure of overall advantage or disadvantage, with food affordability. Food affordability is determined by applying the food prices from the WA Food Access and Cost Survey. The resulting map shows the vulnerability of households in a geographic area to food stress.

The application of the Index, now mapped to a granular Statistical Area 1 (SA2), provides the evidence that households and communities in the remote areas of Western Australia (such as in the East Pilbara and East Kimberley) are the most likely to suffer food stress.<sup>11</sup> The Food Stress Index provided an evidence-informed tool to guide the prioritisation of food relief.

#### **Recommendation 3:**

The House Standing Committee take up the opportunity for a presentation of the Food Stress Index.

#### **Recommendation 4:**

Governments apply the Food Stress Index to map and monitor the potential risk of food insecurity in remote communities and identify strategies and corrective measures to address.

#### **Recommendation 5:**

Governments support the development of a real time food stress and food security dynamic mapping system that includes the overlay of other indicators such as store locations, road networks, transport options, local food supplies, food relief organisations, and so on.

#### **Cultural practices**

Family structures and cultural practices also dictate a unique environment with respect to the sharing of food across the families, communities and for cultural business such as Lore ceremonies and sorry business. During consultations for the Framework, Aboriginal community stakeholders talked about their food culture and funerals in regional and remote areas.<sup>12</sup> They voiced concerns regarding the impact these events can have on local household food security as food relief and other

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<sup>11</sup> Landrigan, T, Kerr, DA, Dhaliwal, S, Pollard, CM. (2018) Protocol for the development of a Food Stress Index to identify households most at risk of food insecurity in Western Australia. *Int J Env Res Pub Health* (15): 2086. doi:10.3390/ijerph16010079

<sup>12</sup> WACOSS (2019) [WA Food Relief Framework Report](#), Lotterywest

material aid is diverted away from locals to people and families travelling to attend the cultural business and funerals.

We know from the statistics that there is a gap in life expectancy between Aboriginal and non-aboriginal Australia.<sup>13</sup> Aboriginal people with travel across the state to pay respect to people who have passed and their families. The length of time of Sorry Business can be between one and four weeks. This is made harder by the frequency of funerals. One emergency relief provider we spoke to during the development of the Framework, said during one week, they provided food for five families who had lost a loved one. Due to the frequency, sadly, of funerals, stocks allocated for everyday distribution can be depleted.

#### **Recommendation 6:**

Funding bodies take into account the amount and type of additional food relief needed in remote communities arising from cultural practices, to ensure adequate and equitable provisions.

#### **Disaster management and logistics**

The Working Group overseeing the development of the Framework found that there were major gaps in transport logistics and infrastructure between food retail, food rescue and food relief organisations, particularly in remote communities.

In remote communities this translates into potentially significant barriers facing residents from having reliable access to affordable fresh and healthy food, groceries and other essential supplies

Natural environmental and health disasters can disproportionately impact remote communities. The road infrastructure is limited and for months of the year there are isolation issues. There have been many examples of climate issues, e.g. due to flooding and storms as well as the recent COVID-19 restrictions and their impact on supply and access to food, such as panic buying and lockdown measures. An influx of Aboriginal people returning to country during the pandemic meant a greater demand for food, exacerbating the pressure on already limited supplies.

#### **Recommendation 7:**

Ensure every community has an established Disaster Preparedness and Management Plan that incorporates food relief, with an emphasis on the provision of nutritious and appropriate items.

#### **Recommendation 8:**

Federal and state governments expand and support effective and efficient charity food logistic systems to remote Aboriginal communities.

#### **WA responses during COVID-19**

The food supply shortage during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period provided the opportunity for the Working Group to collaborate and coordinate a timely and effective charity food sector

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<sup>13</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2014 Australia's health 2014. Australia's health series no. 14. Cat. no. AUS 178. Canberra: AIHW

response. The Group drew upon the resources and capacity of the members to establish a Clearinghouse subcommittee to prioritise food supply and logistics into areas of need across WA. The Clearinghouse alliance included Second Bite, Oz Harvest, Foodbank WA, St Vincent de Paul and The Salvation Army. A significant achievement of this Group was to address urgent food supply shortages by accessing and distributing 92 pallets of donated grocery items, across 13,000 km to remote communities including Wiluna, Halls Creek and Meekatharra. This provided emergency food to over 50,000 people within an eight week period.

Federal and state government funding for food relief contributed to both the acquisition of food and covering the costs of supply chain logistics. The establishment of the Group and the relationships formed through regular meetings and strategic discussions fostered important partnerships that facilitated this urgent and timely response. The Group provided a coordination and engagement point across a number of key government committees, including the State Government's Food Security Working Group and Complex Task Team: Remote Aboriginal Communities, and the Australian Government's National Indigenous Australians Agency Remote Food Security Working Group.

The Working Group and sub-working groups played a critical role in coordinating the public, private and charity sector contribution to enhancing food security in Western Australia. This work will be ongoing as the economic impact of the COVID-19 response will no doubt increase the prevalence of food insecurity across Western Australia requiring a sustained response.

#### **Recommendation 9:**

Governments build on the success of the Food Relief Working Group's approach to addressing food insecurity in remote communities, with ongoing engagement, funding support and by establishing similar mechanisms in all jurisdictions.

#### **Local responses**

The development of the Framework highlighted the many localised opportunities for communities to identify and develop alternate models to enhance community access to affordable healthy food. Supply models should open up pathways for remote communities to develop food enterprises that include is responsive to community need. Models fostering employment opportunities and sustainable revenue are to be particularly encouraged.

#### **Recommendation 10:**

Work with communities to identify sustainable food system enterprise models that increase access to affordable healthy food, improve the local economy, and reduce logistics costs.

Based on feedback from regional and remote stakeholders, an online platform to facilitate the efficient and effective distribution of surplus material goods and resources – bulk food, warehouse storage, transport options, cool rooms – between corporate and charity organisations is being designed. This resource, the Community Organised Resource Exchange (CORE) will facilitate the redistribution of residual and excess products and items, effectively saving them from being sent to landfill. Resources will be tagged when they are uploaded in the system. Organisations and

emergency responders can subscribe to various tags (by location) and receive notifications with real time availability. The applicability of a live material aid locator is highlighted in remote communities.

**Recommendation 11:**

Support existing and developing online platforms to facilitate efficient and effective distribution of surplus goods between the commercial sector, community stores and charity food relief organisations (\* that do not interfere with existing exchange arrangements).

**Quality of food**

Previous inquiries into remote community stores have identified the need to enhance the supply of nutritious and culturally appropriate charity food relief in Australia, including for healthy and 'thrifty' and non-perishable baskets.

**Recommendation 12:**

Co-design, develop and implement food nutritional policy and procurement guidelines.

**Recommendation 13:**

Federal and State Governments to support the establishment of a subsidy for safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food for remote communities.

**Poverty**

At the heart of the issue of food insecurity in remote communities is a lack of employment opportunities and inadequate income. People and families do not have enough money to buy food.<sup>14</sup> During our related research, half of the remote managers said there was hunger in their community because people did not have enough money to buy food.<sup>15</sup> The dignified alleviation of poverty must be at the forefront of addressing food insecurity in remote Aboriginal communities.

**Recommendation 14:**

Governments use integrated policy levers to improve incomes and food security outcomes.

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<sup>14</sup> Pollard CM, Landrigan TJ, Ellies PL, Kerr DA, Lester ML, Goodchild SE. Geographic factors as determinants of food security: a Western Australian food pricing and quality study. *Asia Pac J Clin Nutr.* 2014;23(4):703-713. doi:10.6133/apjcn.2014.23.4.12

<sup>15</sup> Pollard CM et al (2014) 'Geographic factors as determinants of food security: a Western Australian food pricing and quality study', *Asia Pac J Clin Nutr.*,23(4):703-13 doi: 10.6133/apjcn.2014.23.4.12.

## Vignettes

### **Remote Local Area Government - COVID-19 regional shutdown impacts**

Prior to COVID 19 virus, a local government was providing food for local artists up to three times a week from a remote community arts studio. When the pandemic hit, the regional borders closed and LGA employees were forced to work from home, the local artists no longer had access to this food. The artists would spend their pension on their grandchildren needs and sacrifice their own. A big driver of their food insecurity was how expensive healthy food was in the local store.

### **Remote Aboriginal communities Bidyandanga and Pandanus Park**

Remote Aboriginal communities Bidyandanga and Pandanus Park found their communities lacked accessible and affordable food when travel restrictions prevented them from journeying outside the community to shop at bigger supermarkets. The community found it very difficult as they had a store but they hadn't been able to get the food that they have ordered to be delivered each week. This meant that a lot of the shelves were empty in the local store. A charity provider was able to move pallets of groceries in to the communities to shore up food supplies.

### **20,000 meals**

WA Department of Communities connected the Group to VenuesWest, an organisation that manages the major sporting arenas in Perth. VenuesWest teams used the kitchen facilities at Optus Stadium and left over ingredients to prepare 20,000 frozen meals for charity. The Food Relief Clearinghouse was the mechanism used to facilitate the distribution of these, including to remote communities.

### **Regional shopping**

Some communities along the Gibb River Road found it extremely challenging to access and afford enough food because when the families travelled to Derby to do their shopping only the more expensive items were left for sale on the supermarket shelves (the cheapest food gets purchased first in panic buying). This meant families had to go to Derby a few times each week to shop instead of one

### **Wiluna store**

During local investigations about price hikes potentially caused by the pandemic, a local Wiluna Elder relayed that whilst prices and stocks in the store hadn't changed since the onset of the COVID-19, what had changed was people's access and ability to travel to Kalgoorlie, where prices are almost half of what they are in Wiluna. The introduction of travel restrictions meant that local people were unable to travel to regional centres to do regular bulk grocery shopping.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. If you would like to discuss this submission further, please contact the WACOSS Deputy CEO Dr Jennie Gray on 6381 5300 or [jennie@wacoss.org.au](mailto:jennie@wacoss.org.au).

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "L. Giolitto". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Louise Giolitto  
Chief Executive Officer  
WACOSS