

Submission

Inquiry into food security  
in Australia 2023

**ANTAR**



# ANTAR

## Submission: Inquiry into food security in Australia

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**ANTAR is proud to acknowledge and pay our respects to First Nations Peoples as the traditional owners of the lands on which we work across the continent.**

### About ANTAR

**ANTAR is a national advocacy organisation working for Justice, Rights and Respect for Australia's First Nations Peoples. We do this primarily through campaigns, advocacy, and lobbying.**

ANTAR is working to mobilise Australians to vote YES at the referendum for a First Nations Voice to Parliament enshrined in the Constitution, and for this to be complemented with a Makarrata Commission to drive agreement making and truth-telling processes across Australia.

We also engage in national advocacy across various policy and social justice issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, including cultural heritage protection; justice reinvestment, over-incarceration and raising the age of criminal responsibility; anti-racism campaigns, native title and land rights, and closing the life equality gap.

ANTAR is a foundational member of both the Close the Gap Campaign and Change the Record Campaign Steering Committee, and an organisational and executive committee member of Just Reinvest NSW. ANTAR has been working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations and leaders on rights and reconciliation issues since 1997. ANTAR is a non-government, not-for-profit, independently funded and community-based organisation.

“...you need to know the story connected to the food. To do that you need access to your country, to your land, traditionally which is yours... then we can start to learn all our connectedness about where we belong back to Mother Earth. And all that food that comes to her is what we need to survive”.<sup>1</sup>

Noel Butler, Budawang Elder

## Introduction

**Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments to inform the House Standing Committee on Agriculture on the Inquiry into food security in Australia. We acknowledge and support the endeavour to help more Australians access safe, nutritious, affordable and culturally appropriate food and clean water.**

As a non-partisan advocacy organisation working for justice, rights and respect for First Nations peoples, ANTAR is particularly concerned about the impact of food security challenges that disproportionately affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Internationally, First Nations peoples suffer from hunger and malnutrition at a disproportionate rate compared to non-Indigenous populations.<sup>2</sup> Australia is no different. With the pressure of climate change, cost of living, and population growth, food security is a pressing issue for First Nations peoples in Australia, particularly in remote locations.

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<sup>1</sup> The University of Sydney, “[Native Grains from paddock to plate](#)” (2020): 22.

<sup>2</sup> “[Indigenous Peoples](#)”, *United Nations* (UN), no date.

## Summary of recommendations

1. Allocate long term funding to place-based and First Nations-led food production in order to build capacity among community members to allow for long term community-controlled management of these practices.
2. Support the urgent development of First Nations-led academic and community research in food security in urban settings and community-led solutions. This should include gathering national data on food security through a new Australian Health Survey.
3. Adopt a long-term and holistic rights-based approach to supporting and empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to achieve food sovereignty.
4. Federal Government commitment to the Paris Agreement for the 2030 target of zero emissions.
5. Develop and implement a national food, water and nutrition security policy that centres a human rights-based approach and explicitly responds to the threat of climate disruption on food supply and equitable food access.
6. In remote settings, consider the provision of nutritious and affordable fresh food in community stores to be an 'essential service' and extend consistent and long-term government funding and subsidies to fresh food in community stores.
7. In urban settings, introduce subsidised food programs that are culturally relevant and informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values, as well as increased transport options and where appropriate, the introduction of school breakfast programs.
8. Establish a national program modelled on the Fixing Houses for Better Health program, to ensure kitchens in remote, regional and urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing are adequately maintained.

9. Expand cross-sector collaboration between national, jurisdictional and local governments to increase stock of new and culturally appropriate dwellings and ensure proactive repair and maintenance of existing housing.
10. Make it an urgent priority to remove barriers facing First Nations people in accessing their traditional lands and waters.
11. Create non-prescriptive grants that support self-determination in terms of First Nations food sovereignty and food security as well as a specific stream for pilot projects.<sup>3</sup>
12. Co-develop or support First Nations communities in developing emergency plans, inclusive of food reserves and rations for communities most likely to be impacted by supply chain issues, climate disasters, etc.

## Policy context

While robust data on food security in First Nations communities in the Australian context is lacking and national data on food security has not been collected since the 2011-12 Australian Health Survey, existing research shows overwhelmingly that food security challenges affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at significantly higher rates, with 22 to 32 percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing food insecurity compared with 4 to 13 percent of non-Indigenous people in Australia.<sup>4</sup>

In a 2018–19 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey, 43 percent of respondents reported that they had run out of food and could not afford to buy more in the 12 month period under consideration.<sup>5</sup> National data from 2012-2013 shows that more than one in five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were living in a household that, in the previous 12 months, had run out of food and had not been able to afford to buy more, compared with

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<sup>3</sup> [Indigenous Food Sovereignty and Food Security in a Changing Climate](#), Alderhill Planning Inc. for the Climate Action Secretariat and the Cross Government Food Security Steering Committee (2022): 16.

<sup>4</sup> [Evidence for improving food security in Aboriginal communities in NSW](#), *Sax Institute* (2020): 5.

<sup>5</sup> [Food security in remote First Nations communities](#), *Parliament of Australia*, Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities (2020): 65.



less than one in twenty non-Indigenous Australian households that had gone without food.<sup>6</sup>

A 2022 study on food security found that Aboriginal families in urban and regional Australia are experiencing food insecurity on a regular basis, with about 95 percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over not eating adequate amounts of vegetables each day. Furthermore, 41 percent of their energy intake derived from discretionary foods and drinks that tend to be high in added sugar, saturated fat, salt and/or alcohol, often as a result of unequal availability of, or access to, a healthy food supply.<sup>7</sup>

Access to nutritious food is a critical social determinant of health - the daily conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and which influence health outcomes<sup>8</sup> - and, as such, food security is vital to closing the gap in health outcomes between First Nations peoples and non-Indigenous Australians. Poor diet is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, some cancers, tooth decay and other conditions associated with obesity.<sup>9</sup> Properly addressing the root causes of food insecurity would assist with the Closing the Gap targets of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples having a long and healthy life, maintaining their distinct relationships to lands and waters, and having access to information to allow for informed decision-making regarding their own lives and food security.<sup>10</sup>

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap's Implementation Plan considers remote food security a national priority.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the right to food for First Nations peoples is well established in international human rights treaties and under international law. Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) acknowledges the fundamental right to adequate food and to be free of hunger.<sup>12</sup> The UN Declaration on the Rights of

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<sup>6</sup> "[Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities](#)" CRANaplus Submission 63: 4.

<sup>7</sup> Simone Sherriff, Deanna Kalucy, Allison Tong et al., "[Murradambirra Dhanqaang \(make food secure\): Aboriginal community and stakeholder perspectives on food insecurity in urban and regional Australia](#)" *BMC Public Health* 22, 1066 (2022): 2.

<sup>8</sup> "[Social determinants of health](#)", *Australian Institute of Health and Welfare*, 7 July 2022.

<sup>9</sup> "[Health risk factors](#)" *Australian Institute of Health and Welfare*, no date.

<sup>10</sup> Closing the Gap, [Closing the Gap targets and outcomes | Closing the Gap](#) (2021).

<sup>11</sup> [Food security in remote First Nations communities](#), *National Indigenous Australians Agency*, no date.

<sup>12</sup> "[International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#)", *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner*, 1966.

Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) includes provisions for collective rights with regards to land and resources to acquire food.<sup>13</sup>

Under international law, the Australian government is responsible for applying a rights-based approach to food security as well as other policies that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' access to food. This includes the human rights principle of participation in which First Nations peoples are able to shape strategies, policies and programmes promoting the realisation of their right to food. ANTA wishes to stress that any development of a food security plan must address equitable access and utilisation of nutritious food as a human right.<sup>14</sup>

With respect to First Nations peoples in particular, the right to food has a distinctly cultural dimension. Culturally appropriate foods and the activities to obtain them, such as agriculture, hunting and fishing, form an important part of cultural identity and are inextricably linked to access to land, deprivation of access to culturally acceptable food and contamination of food sources.<sup>15</sup> Food is more than something that can be measured purely in terms of quantity and calories. It is shaped by local cultural values, ecological practices, and societal norms that need to be acknowledged in food security projects and policies.<sup>16</sup>

The World Health Organisation defines four broad pillars or dimensions of food security:

- food access, meaning sufficient financial and other resources for people to obtain appropriate food for a nutritious diet;
- food availability, meaning sufficient quantities of nutritious food available on a consistent basis;
- food use, meaning the appropriate use of food, based on knowledge of basic nutrition and care, including the ability to transform food into meals; and
- stability of the other three dimensions over time.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> [“The Right to Food and Indigenous Peoples”](#) Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2008): 1.

<sup>14</sup> [“Climate Disruption, the Food System and Food Security”](#) Public Health Association of Australia (2021): 7.

<sup>15</sup> [“The Right to Food and Indigenous Peoples”](#) (2008): 2.

<sup>16</sup> Sophie Chao, [“Food security starts with food sovereignty”](#) Sydney Business Insights, 2023.

<sup>17</sup> World Bank, [“What is food security?”](#), No date.

Importantly, if First Nations food security is to be addressed in ways that are sustainable, meaningful and culturally relevant - in other words, if we are to find long term solutions for food insecurity that go beyond crisis-based reactions and short term thinking to properly address the underlying root causes - our working definitions of food security and its solutions must be anchored in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems and ways of understanding. For many First Nations peoples, food security cannot be separated from their connection to Country, and to the lands, winds and waters that have sustained them for generations. It is also inclusive of the right to afford non-traditional foods.

Members of several remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities throughout Australia have developed the following more holistic definition of food security:

“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”.<sup>18</sup>

## **Colonisation, disruption of family structures and food security**

“Remember (native foods) are imbued not just with tens of thousands of years of Aboriginal knowledge, spirituality and cultural heritage, but also the racism, frontier violence, theft of land and children, and massacres that have defined this continent’s more recent past.”<sup>19</sup>

**Drew Rooke**

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<sup>18</sup> [“Evidence for improving food security in Aboriginal communities in NSW”](#) *Sax Institute* (2022): 6.

<sup>19</sup> Drew Rooke, [“Growth Industry: Native Foods and White Australia”](#) *Kill your Darlings*, 7 October 2019.



In addressing the root causes of food insecurity in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, AN TAR strongly recommends the Committee recognise the ongoing impact of colonisation - including removal from land, disruption of family structures, disconnection from traditional food practices and intergenerational trauma - on the ability of First Nations peoples to access and afford healthy, fresh and culturally appropriate foods.

While practical and logistical considerations such as transport, fragile supply chains, storage, labour and high costs of key inputs play an undeniable role in achieving food security for First Nations communities, particularly in remote areas, research shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives on the causes of food insecurity often refer to systemic issues and the ongoing effects of colonisation.

In a recent NSW-specific study on Aboriginal community perspectives of food security in urban and regional areas, one Elder highlighted experiences of trauma, racism and disruption to family structures as playing a fundamental role in food choices: “The interruption to our parenting practices due to trauma and stress, and the impact, because when you’re stressed and trying to feed your family, it is easier to get the two-dollar chips and that”.<sup>20</sup>

Another Elder identified the inter-generational loss of healthy food knowledge and preparation skills due to ongoing practices of child removal and disruption of traditional knowledge practices being passed down through family structures: “You know that generational slippage when there is trauma or interrupted parenting practices, kids removed, coming back in, this is stuff [healthy meal preparation] we learnt but now how are we passing that and teaching that on?”<sup>21</sup>

A University of Sydney Institute of Agriculture report on the ancient native grains food system of Aboriginal peoples echoes the importance of addressing the role of systemic causes that contribute to First Nations food insecurity:

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<sup>20</sup> [“Evidence for improving food security in Aboriginal communities in NSW”](#): 14.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

“Due to colonisation, much knowledge, language and lore was fragmented, and in some cases lost”.<sup>22</sup>

This fragmentation is reflected in the statistics not only on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander food security, but the known gaps in health, housing, education, income and youth justice outcomes between First Nations peoples and non-Indigenous Australians. These statistics serve as a reminder of the systemic and structural disadvantages that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities continue to face as they are forced to function in and rely on a system which was designed to disappear them.

ANTAR underscores this reminder as an attempt to urge the Government (and all Australian governments) to consider the intersectionality of these social disadvantages and to highlight the need for cross-sector solutions that are driven by the lived experience and ways of knowing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The need for First Nations peoples to not only benefit from, but to guide and direct research and development related to food security - particularly through the resurgence of native foods and innovation - is paramount.

It is also true that despite this ongoing structural disadvantage, First Nations communities are incredibly resilient, resourceful and adaptive. A 2021 collaborative study by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations on Indigenous Peoples’ food systems identified hundreds of diverse plant and animal species that First Nations peoples around the world depend on and care for to generate food sustainably and enhance biodiversity, without depleting natural resources. The report outlined hundreds of food traditions developed over millennia by First Nations peoples that adapt to the seasonality and natural cycles of their surrounding ecosystems, enable habits to recover and allow ecosystems to replenish themselves, and in doing so provide fresh, nutritious and diverse foods.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> [“Native Grains from paddock to plate”](#): 19.

<sup>23</sup> [Indigenous Peoples’ food systems: Insights on sustainability and resilience from the front line of climate change](#), Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (2021).

Many of these on Country traditional food systems are undergoing a revival here in Australia, but they are at high risk from climate change and the expansion of various industrial and commercial activities, as well as the disruption of knowledge transmission due to ongoing practices of child removal, dispossession and incarceration.

## Food (in)security in remote communities

“Everything’s a good week or so older when it gets here than it is anywhere else and so your fruit and vegetables deteriorate very quickly.”

**Social services, Arnhem Land.**<sup>24</sup>

“More bush food in the supermarket. People would buy it and be more healthy”.

**Aboriginal community member, Katherine region**<sup>25</sup>

In examining factors to strengthen and safeguard food security for First Nations peoples in Australia, it is crucial to acknowledge the differences in challenges faced by those in regional or remote communities and urban populations. ANTAR wishes to stress the importance of pivoting away from one-size-fits-all policies and toward local and place-based solutions that are responsive to the specific needs and challenges faced in particular locations.

The 2020 House Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs report on food pricing and food security in remote First Nations communities recognised that remote communities face food security challenges that many urban communities do not have. For example, significantly and consistently higher food prices, lower quality food and limited cold storage capacity.<sup>26</sup> The report identified that pricing in remote stores is often higher due to their extreme geographic isolation, higher operating costs, lack of bargaining power to access good wholesale prices and complex and fragile supply chains that are easily disrupted by weather, fuel costs, road and sea infrastructure and lack of

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<sup>24</sup> [“Food Security in the Northern Territory”](#) Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (2021): 47.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid: 30.

<sup>26</sup> [“Report into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities”](#): 22.

warehousing.<sup>27</sup> These disparities were highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic when remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities were further disadvantaged.<sup>28</sup>

Food security in remote areas is also affected by the access (or lack thereof) that Traditional Owners and other First Nations people have to their lands. When they are locked out either by access rights or weather events, this precludes vital cultural activities of harvesting, picking, hunting and foraging that are foundational to accessing culturally safe and healthy food options.

In general, anecdotal evidence suggests that while First Nations people in remote Australia do still regularly go hunting and foraging for foods for ceremonial purposes and as a healthy supplement to diet, they are relying more on community stores for food supply compared with the past. A representative from Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands told the House of Representatives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee that in 1974, 90 percent of diet was locally sourced from the bush and 10 per cent from store.<sup>29</sup> Now the store is the primary place for people to access food, with this shift away from traditional food systems and toward reliance on the community store resulting in high consumption of nutrient poor and energy dense foods.

A 2009 report on Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Stores acknowledged the unique role that community stores - that is, a store owned by the community that provides the community with food, drinks and other consumer items - play in contributing to food security in remote communities given their high degree of local market power as either the monopoly provider or one of few providers of food to their communities.<sup>30</sup> The report outlined that community stores are the primary vehicle to ensure access to affordable and nutritious food supply to residents of remote First Nations communities, with most estimates suggesting that between 90 and 95 percent

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid: 23.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid: 80.

<sup>29</sup> [Everybody's Business Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Community Stores](#), House of Representatives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee (2009): 23.

<sup>30</sup> ["Everybody's Business"](#): 5.

of food eaten in remote Aboriginal communities is food purchased in the community store.<sup>31</sup>

This vital role of community stores in either alleviating or exacerbating food insecurity in rural settings goes beyond access to food and speaks to the fundamental need for nutrient dense foods - in particular, fresh fruit and vegetables - to be routinely available and affordable in community stores. Poor nutrition is a major contributor to the poor health outcomes and early death in remote First Nations communities and, as such, a key issue in closing the gap in health. It is estimated that up to nineteen per cent of the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health gap is attributable to diet related causes, including low fruit and vegetable intake.<sup>32</sup>

In remote areas, 20 percent of First Nations people aged 12 years and over reported no usual daily fruit intake and 15 percent reported no usual daily intake of vegetables.<sup>33</sup> Currently, many remote community stores report sales (and profits) being generated disproportionately through customer spending on sweets, tobacco products and sugared drinks, with the selling of perishable fruit and vegetables considered a high risk for the store.<sup>34</sup>

In addressing the food security crisis in remote communities in an immediate capacity, ANTAR recommends that the provision of nutritious and affordable fresh food in community stores should be considered an 'essential service' and receive government funding or subsidies, much like a health clinic or school does.

As long as processed, sugary and fast foods make more economic sense and health nutrient dense foods are high risk for businesses and expensive for community members, food security concerns cannot and will not be adequately addressed. As Brimblecombe and O'Dea (2009) note, the energy-cost differential between energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods and energy-dilute,

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<sup>31</sup> ["Report into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities"](#): 40.

<sup>32</sup> Ernest Hunter, Leigh-ann Onnis and John Pritchard, ["Gardens of discontent: health and horticulture in remote Aboriginal Australia"](#), AIATSIS RESEARCH DISCUSSION PAPER (February 2014): 5.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> ["Everybody's Business"](#): 28.



nutrient-rich foods influences the capacity of Aboriginal people living in remote communities to attain a healthy diet.<sup>35</sup>

In parallel, ANTAAR recommends that local First Nations-led food production - including community gardens, harvesting bush foods, fishing, hunting and other culturally relevant food activities - be heavily invested in and resourced by Australian governments in order to build capacity among community members to allow for long term community-controlled management of these practices.

Government investment in First Nations-led food production will require consistent long term funding and political commitment. As noted by NACCHO, this investment should include: funding for training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people linked to Agriculture jobs in and around communities; and assistance for communities to harvest traditional foods for community consumption and sale to markets.<sup>36</sup>

## **The role of community gardens**

Community gardens - where culturally relevant and agriculturally viable - have the potential to benefit remote, regional and urban communities by improving nutrition through greater access to fresh fruits and vegetables, while also building relationships and promoting self-determination.<sup>37</sup> Where possible, increasing the stock of locally grown and harvested foods in rural community stores will decrease reliance on complex and fragile supply chains and improve the quality and quantity of nutrient dense fresh food available in remote communities.

In 2015, the Armidale Aboriginal Community Garden opened to provide an opportunity for the Anaiwan community to connect, to promote cultural revival and support self-determination, and to generate fresh and healthy food. The garden is built on the old East Armidale Aboriginal Reserve site and has been a collaboration with Elders, local Anaiwan community and Dr Kate Wright as part

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<sup>35</sup> Brimblecombe and O'Dea (2009: 549) as cited in Ernest Hunter, Leigh-ann Onnis and John Pritchard, "[Gardens of discontent: health and horticulture in remote Aboriginal Australia](#)", AIATSIS Research Discussion Paper Number 34, (February 2014): 13.

<sup>36</sup> [Inquiry into food security in Australia](#), NACCHO Submission 113 (2022): 10.

<sup>37</sup> "[Everybody's Business](#)": 71.

of her postdoctoral research. The garden provides a space for ‘intergenerational, intercultural, and interspecies space for environmental and social healing, cultural revival activities, and community building’.<sup>38</sup>

Food Ladder is another example of how community gardens can provide fresh produce, bush food and medicine to their community. Established in Katherine, NT in 2015 in association with Katherine Indigenous Women’s Association and Katherine Town Council, Food Ladder grows its produce hydroponically and in a community garden. As well as providing fresh and culturally appropriate food, Food Ladder provides education and other community based activities.<sup>39</sup> The produce grown at the Katherine Food Ladder is helping to meet both local and interstate demand for fresh produce and bush foods, and is also sold to local businesses and cafes both in Katherine and neighbouring areas.<sup>40</sup>

Research shows that the benefits of increasing the use of garden and bush resources may be greater than simply the food provided; there is also higher bioavailability of micronutrients in locally grown produce, which does not require protracted transport and storage,<sup>41</sup> and activity/land interactions associated with both gardening and First Nations cultural and natural resource management.<sup>42</sup> In addition, evidence suggests that even a brief return to a diet based on gathered/caught rather than bought foods is associated with a significant improvement in the clinical and laboratory status of First Nations people with non-insulin dependent diabetes.<sup>43</sup>

A study on Remote Aboriginal food gardens in the Top End of Australia’s Northern Territory found that integration of remote First Nations-led gardens

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<sup>38</sup> [Arrmidale Aboriginal Community Garden](#) (2023).

<sup>39</sup> [Food Ladder](#).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ming et al. 2012, ‘Folate status and health behaviours in two Australian Indigenous populations in north Queensland’, *Public Health Nutrition* 15(10): 1959–65; Garnett, et al. 2009, ‘Healthy country, healthy people: policy implications of links between Indigenous human health and environmental conditions in tropical Australia’, *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 68: 53–66 as cited in Ernest Hunter, Leigh-ann Onnis and John Pritchard, “[Gardens of discontent: health and horticulture in remote Aboriginal Australia](#)”, AIATSIS Research Discussion Paper Number 34, February 2014: 23.

<sup>42</sup> Garnett et al. 2009 “[Gardens of discontent: health and horticulture in remote Aboriginal Australia](#)”: 23

<sup>43</sup> O’Dea, Spargo and Akerman 1980, ‘The effect of transition from traditional to urban life-style on the insulin secretory response in Australian Aborigines’ as cited in Ernest Hunter, Leigh-ann Onnis and John Pritchard, “[Gardens of discontent: health and horticulture in remote Aboriginal Australia](#)”, AIATSIS Research Discussion Paper Number 34, February 2014: 23.

with schools, health clinics and stores was a crucial factor in their success.<sup>44</sup> In their study, four gardens had developed strong links with the local school and two with the local aged care program and in all cases, these institutions were using garden produce in their nutrition programs. The study concluded that with proper attention paid to what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members require for sustainability of community gardens, the potential of such gardens to improve nutritious food supply to remote communities is large.<sup>45</sup>

## Food (in)security in urban settings

Food insecurity is not limited to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in remote communities, but there is limited research on the key drivers of food insecurity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in urban areas. A 2022 study found that Aboriginal families in urban NSW are experiencing food insecurity on a regular basis, with five core areas impacting food security in urban settings: financial disadvantage, gaps in the local food system, limitations of non-Aboriginal food relief services, on-going impacts of colonisation; and maintaining family, cultural and community commitments and responsibilities.<sup>46</sup>

While the urban food environment can offer a tremendous diversity of food for consumers, there are huge geographical disparities in access to fresh, healthy food, determined by the socioeconomic status of each region.<sup>47</sup>

People living in low socioeconomic status areas tend to purchase a smaller variety of fruits and grocery foods that are low in fibre and high in fat, salt and sugar, compared to people in advantaged areas.<sup>48</sup> A recent study conducted in Sydney identified so-called 'food deserts' and 'food swamps' in the city's economically disadvantaged areas where healthy food options were scant or

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<sup>44</sup> Andrew Hume, Kerin O'Dea, Julie Brimblecombe (2013), "[We need our own food, to grow our own veggies...](#)" Remote Aboriginal food gardens in the Top End of Australia's Northern Territory, *Aust N Z J Public Health*. 2013 Oct;37(5):434-41: 435.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid: 441.

<sup>46</sup> Sherriff et al., "[Murradambirra Dhangaang](#)".

<sup>47</sup> Ibid: 2.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid: 12.

non-existent while unhealthy food was easy to purchase when compared to the more affluent suburbs.<sup>49</sup>

As the Public Health Association of Australia points out in their submission to this Inquiry, these inequities are avoidable and the level of poverty and food insecurity in a country is a choice.<sup>50</sup>

Aboriginal participants in the aforementioned 2022 study explained that many Aboriginal families in their community struggled just to cover essential, fixed expenses (i.e. rent, childcare, other bills), leading to behaviours like food rationing, purchasing cheap and unhealthy but filling foods, and caregivers skipping meals to ensure children were fed first.<sup>51</sup> Participants further listed the unavailability of healthy food options both in terms of takeaway shops and supermarkets in the suburbs where most Aboriginal families live, limited transport options to healthy food shops and larger supermarkets, and easy access to cheap fast food as contributing factors leading to unhealthy food choices.

Given the notable lack of research into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experiences of food security in urban settings and community-led solutions, ANTAR recommends the urgent development of First Nations-led academic and community research to fill this gap.

Further, informed by the participant suggestions to help ease food insecurity in First Nations urban communities in NSW, ANTAR recommends the introduction of subsidised food programs that are culturally relevant and informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values as well as increased transport options for First Nations community members to more easily access fresh and nutrient dense foods. Where appropriate, the introduction of school breakfast programs may also help alleviate food insecurity stresses being experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in urban contexts.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas Astell-Burt, Xiaoqi Feng, "[Geographic inequity in healthy food environment and type 2 diabetes: can we please turn off the tap?](#)" *Med Journal Australia* (2015).

<sup>50</sup> PHAA, [Inquiry into food security in Australia](#), submission 58 (2023): 7.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid: 6.

<sup>52</sup> These recommendations are informed by those in Simone Sherriff et al. '[Murradambirra Dhangaang \(make food secure\): Aboriginal community and stakeholder perspectives on food insecurity in urban and regional Australia](#)', *BMC Public Health* 22, 2022.

## Health hardware and housing

In addition to availability and affordability of food, there exists a third critical element of food security: health hardware. That is, the equipment and resources necessary to safely store and prepare foods in the home, including refrigerators, potable water supply and waste management, and other resources for safe food preparation.<sup>53</sup>

In their submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture Inquiry into Food Security, the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) outlined the well established intersection between food security and housing. A 2013 Housing for Health report suggests that across Australia, only 6 percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have access to the health hardware needed to be food secure.<sup>54</sup> More recent data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare suggests that 21 percent of First Nations households in remote areas do not have working facilities for preparing food.<sup>55</sup> In urban settings, lack of stable housing and cooking facilities, including living in social housing with broken appliances and inadequate storage and bench space, is a major barrier to being able to safely store and prepare healthy foods.<sup>56</sup>

Further research shows that much of the work to improve health hardware in homes is not complicated or expensive but comes down to routine maintenance.<sup>57</sup> In light of this, the intersection between food security and safe and adequate housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in remote communities cannot be ignored.

Housing is one of the 19 national socio-economic targets of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. As such, ANTAR strongly recommends and encourages cross-sector collaboration between national, jurisdictional and local

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<sup>53</sup> [“Everybody’s Business”](#): 96.

<sup>54</sup> [Inquiry into food security in Australia](#), NACCHO Submission 113 (2022): 8.

<sup>55</sup> [Access to functional housing with utilities](#), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework (2022).

<sup>56</sup> Sherriff et al., [“Murradambirra Dhangaang”](#): 8.

<sup>57</sup> Tess Lea and Paul Torzillo [“The cunning of data in Indigenous housing and health”](#) *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community* Volume 44:4 (2016).



governments and communities to increase stock of new and culturally appropriate dwellings and ensure proactive repair and maintenance of existing housing.

Addressing the fundamental need for safe, adequate and culturally appropriate housing that is subject to proper and ongoing routine maintenance will not only contribute to the reduction of overcrowding but significantly improve food security in remote communities by addressing inadequate health hardware. Even if and where access to and availability of food is sufficient, food insecurity will persist if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples do not have access to the proper refrigeration, cooktops, work surfaces and potable water required to safely prepare healthy meals. This is echoed in the WHO's third pillar of food security - food use, including the ability to transform food into nutritious meals.

Further, ANTAR echoes NACCHO recommendation 6, to establish a national program modelled on the Fixing Houses for Better Health program, to ensure kitchens in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing are adequately maintained.<sup>58</sup>

## **Bush tucker and native foods**

A recurring theme in recent research on First Nations food security involves increasing access to bush tucker and native foods as a means of achieving food security. In a literature review on the link between food security and traditional food access, availability and use in remote Aboriginal communities, it was found that traditional foods contribute positively to the diets of First Nations people, and that the access, availability and use of traditional foods have the potential to recover, improve and safeguard food security in remote Aboriginal communities now and in the future.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> [Inquiry into food security in Australia](#), NACCHO Submission 113 (2022): 3.

<sup>59</sup> Clint Bussey, "[Food security and traditional foods in remote Aboriginal communities: A review of the literature](#)" *Australian Indigenous Health Bulletin* 13: 2 (2013): 1.

Traditional foods, due to their connectivity with cultural practices and traditional knowledge, impact not only physical health, but also emotional, mental, and spiritual health.<sup>60</sup>

New research from James Cook University suggests that transitioning the agricultural landscape to include a diversity of native bush foods would also help reverse environmental degradation by helping to restore balance in coastal ecosystems through reducing runoff, improving soil health and supporting biodiversity.<sup>61</sup>

Any discussion on the potential of bush tucker and native foods to relieve food insecurity must be aware of two things: firstly, it must resist the romanticisation of the 'traditional' or 'native' in current food processes - including ingredients, methods and access - which risks casting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in a fixed historical position that is somehow separate to the needs and challenges of the modern world. Secondly, it must recognise that while relying exclusively on a 'traditional' diet may no longer be practical or desirable for most people, the resurgence or revival of First Nations foodways holds much nutritional and spiritual value and must be accompanied by the appropriate knowledges, customs and cultural practices that protect and give context to the harvesting, preparation and consumption of native foods in today's world. This is particularly relevant in the context of climate change, resource extraction and the increasing industrialisation of food. For example, higher than normal concentrations of radio-nuclides were recently found in freshwater mussels, turtles and water lilies, leading researchers to suspect that toxic metals from mine sites were making their way directly into these traditional foods and/or surface water.<sup>62</sup>

PFAS (perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl) is another contaminant that is leaving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with contaminated soil and water. In Wreck Bay, NSW the chemical has leached into the surface water,

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<sup>60</sup> Bethany Elliott, Deepthi Jayatilaka, Contessa Brown, Leslie Varley and Kitty K. Corbet "[We Are Not Being Heard: Aboriginal Perspectives on Traditional Foods Access and Food Security](#)", *Journal of Environmental and Public Health* (2012).

<sup>61</sup> [Bringing back bushfoods: Australia's landscape mapped to boost bush tucker](#) James Cook University, media release (4 November 2022).

<sup>62</sup> Bussey, "[Food security](#)": 6.

groundwater and soil, which will negatively affect the land and water in the community for generations.<sup>63</sup> In 2018, residents of Katherine, NT were advised not to drink the water or fish in the river due to PFAS.<sup>64</sup> This contamination caused by the Australian Defence Force not only affects the local community's food security short term but creates long term issues surrounding food sovereignty.

The benefits of native foods and their procurement are well established and compelling, not only in terms of nutritional value but also with respect to the wider social determinants of health. Traditional foods and associated resources can be the foundations of improved education, employment and commercial opportunities.<sup>65</sup> ANTAR wishes to stress that in order to fulfil their potential to contribute to increased food security, native foods and bush tucker must be protected from contaminants from mining and other extractive practices that are increasingly widespread among regions where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples live.

Furthermore, it is essential that the primary beneficiaries of traditional harvesting and hunting practices are the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and communities who most need access to these native foods, as opposed to the marketing of the native bush food industry to non-Indigenous Australians. Where bush food businesses are owned by non-Indigenous companies, traditional owners should be acknowledged and remunerated appropriately.<sup>66</sup>

The major barrier to accessing and harvesting bush tucker and native foods remains access to land and water systems. Many Traditional Owners and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals are locked out of their lands and waterways either due to access rights or weather events, removing a vital cultural activity that has negative implications for food security. There has also

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<sup>63</sup> Kelly Fuller, "[Wreck Bay Aboriginal community says its voice has been ignored in PFAS settlement](#)" *ABC News*, 18 May 2023.

<sup>64</sup> Roxanne Fitzgerald, "[PFAS chemical contamination at Katherine spreads as Defence removes soil](#)" *ABC News*, 15 June 2023.

<sup>65</sup> Bussey, "[Food security](#)": 7.

<sup>66</sup> Gather+Grow Queensland Remote Food Security Strategy 2023-2032 Draft [Media Release \(hw.qld.gov.au\)](#), *Queensland Government*

been a change in access to traditional lands due to farming, which in turn has changed the environment and the plants and animals that are available.<sup>67</sup>

As stated by the NSW Aboriginal Land Council in their report on food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities, returning land and fishing rights to First Nations people strengthens communities capacity to supply their own foods.<sup>68</sup> Access to traditional lands and food increases food sovereignty and assists people's ability to provide for themselves.<sup>69</sup> As such, ANTAR strongly recommends the removal of barriers to accessing traditional lands and waters.

Interestingly, in a study on First Nations peoples' access to traditional native foods in an urban context in Canada, participants stated that increased political representation was vital to improving access to traditional foods.<sup>70</sup> It is ANTAR's belief that a constitutionally enshrined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice would contribute meaningfully to the ability of First Nations peoples to access bush tucker and to put forward culturally relevant and community-based solutions to food insecurity more broadly.

## Impacts of climate change

Climate change will impact food production and access to clean water globally. For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples this will add another layer of difficulty to the existing issue of food and water security in remote areas where food is already expensive and hard to source. There will also be other impacts from climate change that will affect food security, including extreme weather events, safe water supplies and disease.<sup>71</sup> Shorter growing periods, changes in rainfall, ocean temperatures rising and quality of crops will all negatively affect food availability and affordability.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> [Food Security in the Northern Territory 2021](#), Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (2021): 27.

<sup>68</sup> [Report into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities](#): 105.

<sup>69</sup> [Food Security in the Northern Territory 2021](#): 26.

<sup>70</sup> Bethany Elliott, Deepthi Jayatilaka, Contessa Brown, Leslie Varley and Kitty K. Corbet "[We Are Not Being Heard](#)": [Aboriginal Perspectives on Traditional Foods Access and Food Security](#)" *Journal of Environmental and Public Health* (2012).

<sup>71</sup> [Food Security in the Northern Territory](#), Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (April 2021).

<sup>72</sup> [Climate Disruption, the Food System and Food Security](#), *Public Health Association of Australia* (2021).

The UN Office of the High Commissioner acknowledges that climate change negatively impacts the realisation of the right to food and disproportionately impacts those who have contributed the least to its occurrence, including First Nations peoples who are most at risk of suffering from climate-induced food insecurity and hunger.<sup>73</sup> Simple food-generating activities such as fishing will become harder in the future due to climate change affecting fish stock.<sup>74</sup> OHCHR further states that modern industrial food systems and supply chains are fossil-fuel energy intensive, making them significant greenhouse gas emitters that contribute to climate disruption and simultaneously produce food surplus and hunger.<sup>75</sup> As such, the urgent reduction of greenhouse gas emissions is key to limiting the climate-related impacts on the right to food.<sup>76</sup>

Climate change will also have an impact on our freshwater sources and water quality. Food security is inextricably linked to water security; if you are unable to cook and wash food in clean water, you will suffer from food insecurity. Surveys in First Nations communities in Australia suggest that some current supply chains are already unable to supply clean drinking water at affordable prices, with high bottled water prices affecting people's ability to afford healthy food.<sup>77</sup>

In the Walgett Aboriginal community, for example, almost half (44 percent) of those surveyed reported experiencing water insecurity.<sup>78</sup> Alarming, sodium content in the area was found to be almost twice the accepted levels for palatability in the Australian government's drinking water guidelines.<sup>79</sup> The higher water temperatures, more frequent floods and more severe droughts expected due to climate change will exacerbate many forms of water pollution

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<sup>73</sup> [The impact of climate change on the right to food](#), United Nations Human Rights Office of the Commissioner (2023).

<sup>74</sup> [A/HRC/53/47: Adverse impact of climate change on the full realization of the right to food - Report of the Secretary-General \(Advance edited version\)](#), United Nations, 19 June 2023.

<sup>75</sup> [The impact of climate change on the right to food](#), United Nations Human Rights Office of the Commissioner, 2023.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> T Tonkin, A Deane, A Trindall, L Weatherall, T Madden, B Moore, N Earle, M Nathan, S Young, R McCausland, G Leslie, K Bennett-Brook, W Spencer, C Corby OAM, J Webster, E Rosewarne [Yuwaya Ngarra-li Community Briefing Report, Key Findings from the Food and Water Security Surveys in Walgett](#) (2023): 8.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid: 3.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid: 3.



as well as extend salinization of groundwater, decreasing freshwater availability for humans and ecosystems in coastal areas.<sup>80</sup>

In light of these issues, ANTAR urges the Government to ensure water security is addressed as part of national programs to improve food security and diet.

Extreme climate events can also destroy major infrastructure, cutting off remote communities and disrupting the supply chain. This is not only a future concern. In December 2022, the Fitzroy River Bridge at Fitzroy Crossing in the Kimberley - a major supply chain route for remote communities in the Northern Territory and Western Australia - suffered significant damage due to flooding generated by Ex-Tropical Cyclone Ellie and became unusable. As a result of the damage, dozens of First Nations communities in the area were evacuated, freight costs for businesses increased by up to 75 percent, and food supplies were dangerously low.<sup>81</sup> As of August 2023, construction to repair it is still underway.<sup>82</sup>

Central to promoting food security is building a resilient food system which can withstand climatic changes. Without this, food production, distribution and utilisation will be compromised.<sup>83</sup> Given the effect that climate change is already having on communities, food and water security are paramount in having an outlook system in place for future climate change events. As such, ANTAR strongly believes that Australia should adopt policies to achieve emissions reductions targets consistent with global warming projections of less than 1.5°C.<sup>84</sup>

In line with the Public Health Association of Australia's recommendations in their Position Statement on Climate Disruption, the Food System and Food Security, ANTAR urges the Government to develop and implement a national food and nutrition security policy that centres a human rights-based approach and

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<sup>80</sup> Editors: Bryson Bates, Zbigniew W. Kundzewicz, Shaohong Wu and Jean Palutikof, [Climate Change and Water](#), Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (June 2018).

<sup>81</sup> Gus McCubbing and Angela Macdonald-Smith, "[Freight costs spike as Kimberley floods cut off artery to WA's north](#)", *Financial Review*, 5 January 2023; Giovanni Torre, "[If food doesn't come in today we are going to be in big trouble](#)" - [Fitzroy Valley flood crisis continues](#)", *National Indigenous Times*, 5 January 2023.

<sup>82</sup> "[New Fitzroy River Bridge](#)", *Mainroads Western Australia*, Last updated: 23 August 2023.

<sup>83</sup> [Inquiry into food security in Australia](#), National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation Submission 113 (December 2022): 9.

<sup>84</sup> [Climate Disruption, the Food System and Food Security](#), *Public Health Association of Australia* (2021): 1.

explicitly responds, using both mitigative and adaptive actions, to the threat of climate disruption on food supply and equitable food access.<sup>85</sup> Such a policy should be developed with climate change, food system and public health experts.

## Conclusion

Food security is an ongoing issue for many First Nations peoples in Australia. Previous inquiries and reports, both at a community and federal level, have provided sound and evidence-based recommendations to increase food and water security more broadly in Australia. While some of these recommendations have been adopted, achieving better food and water security outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will require longer term and collaborative policy changes that reflect their definitions of food and water security, are grounded in food sovereignty and empower them to implement the solutions they know will work for their communities.

Research has shown that food insecurity rarely occurs in isolation but rather alongside economic, health and housing insecurity.<sup>86</sup> Factors such as violence, child removal, interaction with police, racism and discrimination and trauma further heighten risk and increase vulnerability to food insecurity.<sup>87</sup>

Understanding and tending to these intersections is crucial to creating better social policy that is capable of addressing barriers to food security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in holistic and lasting ways.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>86</sup> For more, see: Nicolas Herault and David C. Ribar, "[Food Insecurity and Homelessness in the Journeys Home Survey](#)", *Melbourne Institute Working Paper No. 15/16* (2016).

<sup>87</sup> Mitchell Bowden, "[Understanding food insecurity in Australia](#)", *Australian Institute of Family Studies* (2020).