

## **SUBMISSION TO THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT ON THE NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR FOOD SECURITY IN REMOTE FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES –**

**The George Institute for Global Health**

**August 2024**

### **Acknowledgment of Country**

The George Institute for Global Health ('The George Institute') acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands on which we work, and in particular the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation on which our Sydney office is situated. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and future. We value and respect the ongoing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Country and seek to work in partnership with communities to deliver better health outcomes.

### **About The George Institute for Global Health**

The George Institute is a leading global medical research institute, founded in Sydney, Australia, and with major centres in China, India and the UK. Our mission is to improve the health of millions of people worldwide, particularly those living in resource-poor settings, by challenging the status quo and using innovative approaches to prevent and treat non-communicable diseases.

Our Food Policy Team works in Australia and overseas to reduce death and disease caused by poor diets. The team conducts multi-disciplinary research with a focus on generating outputs that will help government, industry and communities to deliver healthier food environments for all.

Our Guunu-maana (Heal) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Program drives meaningful and ethical research and advocacy to transform the health and wellbeing of First Nations peoples and communities. Guunu-maana is led through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing to generate evidence that privileges Indigenous knowledges and translates to actions that empower peoples and communities.



## About this submission

The George Institute welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Australian Government's consultation on the *National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations Communities* ('The National Strategy'). We commend the Government for developing a National Strategy in response to Recommendation 10 of the 2020 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities. In this submission we will draw on research we have conducted, or been involved in, that addresses the issues of food and water security in remote regional Australia.

Since 2019, The George Institute and a research team from the University of New South Wales (UNSW) have been working with the community of Walgett in New South Wales, as part of the unique Yuwaya Ngaari-li (YN) partnership with the Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG)<sup>1</sup>. The partnership is collaborating on evidence-based research projects and building capacity to implement sustainable solutions to improve the health and well-being, and the social, built and physical environment of Aboriginal people in Walgett.

We draw on our own research and the work of this group in our submission to highlight the powerful relationships that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have to food and food systems through connection to Country. The work led by DEG and Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service (WAMS) in Walgett, NSW, shows the interconnectedness of water security and food security and priorities for successful community interventions to address these issues. Below we make recommendations that draw on a strengths-based approach to national food and water security reform, focused on the cultural determinants of health.

## I. The National Strategy must prioritise First Nations leadership and establish clear lines of accountability for implementation

*The George Institute recommends that the* Australian Government:

1. **Embeds a strengths-based approach** into the National Strategy, which recognises the cultural determinants of health, to understand the issues of nutrition and food and water security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
2. **Prioritises community involvement**, in the development and implementation of the National Strategy, including shared planning, decision-making and evaluation by communities and governments.
3. **Integrates and addresses water security**, including the health of the rivers, as an integral component of food security throughout the National Strategy.
4. **Adopts a systems approach to developing policy**, recognising the links between food and water systems, the burden of non-communicable disease, climate change



and equity; and establish multi-sectoral working groups at community level to bring together relevant stakeholders.

5. Ensure **adequate funding and resources** are provided to ensure local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations can be effectively engaged in both long-term planning and short-term crisis responses to food and water security.

More detail is needed on how the National Strategy will be implemented. The National Strategy does not adequately address the role of the Australian Government in leading and coordinating the policy, and the responsibilities of States, Territories and Local Governments in implementing jurisdictional responsibilities. Further, The George Institute recommends that the National Strategy includes formal mechanisms for communities to identify food-security priorities and establishes authority for community decision-making to ensure government accountability, respect and reciprocity, transparency and responsiveness.

### ***Strengths-based approaches are integral to policymaking affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples***

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a strong connection to food and water and food practices through their sovereign relationship with Country.<sup>2</sup> For thousands and thousands of years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have kept their cultures strong and resilient, to nurture health and wellbeing.<sup>3</sup> Connection to Country, including through traditional foods and food practices, is central to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander holistic view of health.<sup>3</sup> Prior to colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples lived an ecological lifestyle, with high levels of physical activity, nutrient-dense diets and sophisticated agricultural and aquacultural practices.<sup>2</sup> Traditional foods remain an important part of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and identity and evidence suggests that accessing traditional foods can protect against food insecurity.<sup>4</sup>

Colonisation had, and continues to have, profound and detrimental impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, including on food security. Colonisation disrupted healthy traditional diets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, rich in native plant foods and animal proteins.<sup>5</sup> Past and ongoing colonisation has affected the intimate relationship that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have with Country, including food and food practices, through land clearings, introduction of foreign animals, and the forced use of rations.<sup>2</sup> Complex social determinants, including those related to the ongoing impacts of colonisation, have prevented many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities from accessing safe, healthy, and affordable food.<sup>6</sup>

Food insecurity has long-term health impacts. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience diet-related chronic diseases such as type-2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease, at much higher rates than non-Indigenous Australians.<sup>7</sup> There is no evidence that diseases such as diabetes or cardiovascular disease affected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples maintaining traditional diets before colonisation.<sup>2</sup> Further, the cultural determinants of health, including self-determination, First Nations knowledges, cultural expression and



Connection to Country, have been continually neglected by successive governments in response to food security issues.

New ways of thinking about improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health are needed, that prioritise the cultural determinants of health including self-determination, First Nations knowledges, cultural expression, and Connection to Country.<sup>3</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as the oldest continuous living civilisations in the world, hold immense expertise in designing and leading solutions to health challenges, including nutrition and food security. Progress in improving food security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders demands a genuine commitment to collaboration from policymakers, involving a process where community define their priorities and lead the design and delivery of policies and programs.<sup>3</sup>

We urge the Government to embed this strengths-based approach into the Strategy when considering evidence related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, whilst also considering the responsibility of the various levels of governments. We also recommend that the ongoing effects of colonisation, including racism, intergenerational trauma, stolen generations and loss of land, be addressed in relation to their effects on cultural continuity and well-being, as part of a holistic approach to tackling food and water security.

## **II. Responses to the National Strategy Discussion Paper**

### ***1. Evaluation and continuous improvement should be led by First Nations communities***

Evaluation and continuous improvement of the National Strategy, over the ten-year implementation period, should be ongoing and build on Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of working with at least biannual stock takes to assess progress and consider adaptations. Local Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) should be closely involved in the evaluation.

A national independent ACCO should be adequately resourced to conduct continuous monitoring and evaluation of the National Strategy. Information sharing between government and communities should be an ongoing two-way exchange (partnership) guaranteeing that community perspectives and recommendations will be acted upon in a timely manner and respected. Community engagement processes should be adapted to ensure communities are provided adequate time, notice, and information about the process to ensure all community members have an opportunity to contribute. Future community consultations should ensure that Torres Strait Island communities are also included.

Regular assessments of the prevalence and distribution of food and water insecurity need to be undertaken, using culturally appropriate and comprehensive tools to capture the quantity and quality of food and water and the severity of food and water insecurity, for example the Water InSecurity Experiences (WISE) Scale and Household Food Insecurity Access Scale



(HFIAS). In addition, qualitative community-led research with people experiencing food insecurity should be conducted to better understand the complex factors leading to and perpetuating food and water insecurity. The importance of data sovereignty should be recognised, meaning that communities would retain ownership of their data and have say over how it is used. Local and state government and health departments should share the data they have collected about communities with Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) and support them to analyse and use the data.

In terms of what already exists, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Nutrition Survey contains some questions on food security. However, it takes a Western perspective that does not take account of Aboriginal cultural practices or their holistic approach to health. For example, it has no questions around native foods and medicines.

## ***2. Focus Area Country***

We agree that Country is an important Focus Area and commend the Australian Government for supporting First Nations people to increase participation in local food sourcing, production, distribution, and knowledge sharing. We note that for First Nations people, Country refers to a multi-dimensional concept, in which the land, water, skies and spirit are interconnected with culture, identity, knowledge and relationships.<sup>8</sup> For this reason it is critical that water is also considered as it is an integral part of connecting with Country.

We recommend that the outcomes and activities that reference land and sea management should be broadened to “land and water management activities” to ensure the inclusion of all water bodies including rivers and groundwater. We recommend that the Strategy include an action to ensure that the health of rivers and groundwaters are restored, protected and maintained to provide river foods and water for garden networks.

The strategy describes land mass owned under Native Title but does not consider that First Nations people hold less than 1% of Australian water licenses.<sup>9</sup> Intended outcomes and actions should include improving First Nation access and ownership of water as an integral part of food security. Food and water sovereignty should be central to the strategy, ensuring that First Nation values are upheld whereby land, water, humans, and nature are integrated, and Indigenous knowledge systems are prioritised. Every person should have the right to access healthy, culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods and have the autonomy to define their own food and agriculture systems. ACCOs should be supported to document traditional knowledge and learnings in relation to food and water so that this valuable knowledge is not lost.

## ***3. Focus area - Health***

We agree that Health is an important Focus Area. While the proposed actions to train and strengthen the workforce are useful, the focus is solely on education of health workers. We recommend that the National Strategy address the broader social determinants of health, in line with a First Nations holistic approach to health that goes beyond physical well-being to encompass social, emotional and cultural well-being. In line with this funding and resources



should be provided to ensure local ACCOs can establish programs to address food and water security in their communities which would enable greater food sovereignty.

The National Strategy should ensure that both the quantity and quality of food and water that is available, accessible and consumed in remote communities is explicitly considered, including ensuring foods meet appropriate standards in terms of nutrition, health and cultural appropriateness. Guidelines for drinking water need to be revised and legislation considered to ensure standards for sodium levels are aligned with health needs.

#### **4. Focus area - Housing**

We agree that Housing is an important Focus Area and we commend the strategy for including access to safe water as an intended outcome. We recommend that the National Strategy include the development of nationally consistent rules on essential services to ensure that responsible jurisdictions are held accountable in delivering essential services including **free safe water** and **affordable electricity** to remote houses. We quote from a recent paper by White et al.

*The division of jurisdictional accountabilities between the Commonwealth and the states and territories for the funding of essential services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities represents a piecemeal approach by settler policymakers that has too often resulted in services that do not adequately reflect the needs of communities themselves. There is an urgent need for regulatory frameworks to be developed that better support the rights of Australia's First Peoples to participate in decision-making about present and future energy systems.<sup>10</sup>*

We recommend that sustainability is included in the intended outcome: Remote housing policies and programs deliver remote housing that is appropriately designed, built, renovated, and repaired in line with remote community food security, **sustainability** and health needs. To ensure houses are adequately protected from all weather conditions including extreme heat to support food preparation in the home. We also recommend that food storage facilities are included in the intended outcome: Remote community housing has the appropriate level of food preparation and cleaning equipment **and food storage facilities** to maintain food security and food hygiene.

#### **5. Focus area – Families and Communities**

We agree that Families and Communities are an important Focus Area. We agree with the outcomes and support the draft actions. We commend the Australian Government for proposing to “Introduce a flexible fund to support place-based food security projects in remote communities, community-led and tailored to local need. The fund could support projects such as sustainable power, storage solutions, transport, local food production, and ongoing maintenance.” However, we recommend that the funds are distributed by the



National remote food security governance body that is established with effective community input.

We recommend the Strategy ensures that any responses to food insecurity are co-designed directly with people with lived experience of food insecurity. ACCOs, First Nations community members and Elders need to be involved at all levels of decision-making and implementation, prioritising local expertise, local needs and local governance structures in both long term planning and emergency responses to food and water security. When collaborating with First Nations community members, due consideration should be given to cultural needs and practices including allowing adequate time for family and community responsibilities including Sorry Business.

## ***6. Focus area - Stores***

We agree that Stores is an important Focus Area, but recommend it be broadened to “Food Providers” to incorporate other parts of the food environment including schools, cafes, food schemes etc.

The National Strategy should ensure that proposed actions to support community stores while overseen by a National ACCO embed community-leadership and management to ensure the nuanced needs of the widely varying remote community food providers are met. In addition, subsidies should be reviewed to ensure that community-led stores are adequately supported and that community members are benefiting through affordable prices.

Local stores should be supported to ensure foods meet appropriate standards in terms of nutrition, health and cultural appropriateness for example by using the Good Tucker App.<sup>11</sup>

## ***7. Focus area – Supply Chains***

We agree that Supply Chains is an important Focus Area. There is a need to adopt a systems approach and prioritise policies that ensure highly nutritious local food supplies can respond to increasing climate and water challenges. For example, we recommend ensuring that franchise supermarkets in remote communities have policies and plans to manage disruptive events to ensure an ongoing supply of healthy food to the community (for example an emergency food security response plan for when the Walgett IGA store burnt down).

The Strategy should support consumer demand for sustainable, fresh and healthy foods, and implement policies to ensure these foods are easily accessible, available and affordable. This should include addressing the commercial determinants of health, for example by restricting advertising and promotion of unhealthy food and drinks in remote communities.

## ***8. Focus area – Healthy economies***



We agree with Healthy Economies as an important Focus Area and support the proposed outcomes and actions. We strongly support the Potential Action for: The Australian Government to establish a National Sugar Tax and utilise the revenue to provide community-level food security; healthy food subsidies; health reinvestment; access to drinkable water. We recommend that for sugar-sweetened beverages that this is set using a tiered approach of up to 60c per litre in line with the Grattan Institute's recommendations.<sup>12</sup>

To effectively grow healthy economies, community-led collaborations and partnerships should be supported and expanded. The Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership between the Dhariwaa Elders Group and UNSW should be used as a model example and other communities supported to develop such partnerships.

### **9. Focus area – Policies, Practice and Governance**

We agree with Policies, Practice and Governance as an important Focus Area. We agree with the outcomes and actions and commend the Government on the planned action to: Establish a national remote food security governance body – with Aboriginal community controlled peak organisations as equal partners. We suggest expanding this action to ensure that both the governance body and community organisations are adequately resourced to achieve these goals.

In addition, we recommend that local, state, and federal governments investigate the use of existing legislation to promote the availability and accessibility of healthy food and water. We also recommend that the Strategy action plan and any new food policies are developed, implemented and evaluated through an ongoing process of community-led policy development that recognises Traditional Knowledges and includes engagement with community leaders and Elders, and shared planning and decision making.

### **Conclusion**

The George Institute welcomes the Australian Government's *National Strategy for Food Security in remote First Nation Communities*. We agree with the Focus Areas proposed and commend the Government on the draft outcomes and actions. We strongly recommend that the Strategy include clear details on implementation and national coordination to clarify clear lines of jurisdictional responsibility and ensure there is full accountability taken for implementing proposed actions.

As highlighted in this submission, recognising and respecting the cultural determinants of health are crucial components of any policy or program on food security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. There is an urgent need to re-think approaches to policymaking on nutrition and food security, to prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' holistic understanding of health and wellbeing, and how food and food systems relate to that. Importantly, this process must be led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, in authentic partnership with governments through shared





decision-making, and equitable and sustainable funding arrangements. We recommend that the Strategy clearly prioritises First Nation leadership, governance, and decision making. We also hope that the National Strategy will integrate water security as an integral factor in food security. We have included the case study below to show the importance of self-determination towards approaches to food and water security.

We welcome further engagement with the Government on the development of the Strategy.

***Annex: Example of community self-determination taking a holistic approach to food and water security***

***Food and water for life: case study of the Yuwaya Ngarra-li' partnership, Walgett***

Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations and community members in Walgett, located in north-west NSW, have been long concerned about the intolerable levels of food and water insecurity in their town. A community-driven partnership – called 'Yuwaya Ngarra-li'—led by the Dharriwaa Elders group with the University of New South Wales and others, including Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service, has been acting on Walgett community concerns about food, nutrition and water.

Yuwaya Ngarra-li's 'Food and Water for Life Program', aims to address food and water insecurity, poor drinking water, costly and poor-quality food, and the associated health issues in Walgett. The degradation and drying up of the rivers over time has had devastating effects on sources of food and water for the local community, including access to fish and yabbies from the river, as well as clean water for drinking and water for vegetable gardens. Due to the quantity and quality of river water, Walgett uses "bore" groundwater from the Great Artesian basin to supply the town with drinking water. UNSW experts and medical researchers from the George Institute have found concerning levels of sodium in Walgett bore water supplies. Walgett tap water is 15 times higher in sodium than medical practitioners recommend for people with severe hypertension or renal and heart issues, which is concerning given the high incidence of chronic disease in the community.<sup>13</sup>

In 2020, the NSW Government installed a reverse osmosis plant to remove the sodium and improve the taste of tap water, after successful advocacy from the Dharriwaa Elders Group and WAMS, supported by The George Institute. However, this plant had to be decommissioned as there was no place for the wastewater (brine), so the town was left again to rely on poor-quality bore water with high levels of sodium and a slimy texture.<sup>14</sup> The Dharriwaa Elders Group have since paid for a drinking water kiosk (which rely on reverse osmosis) in the main street of Walgett to provide safe, free water for the community, who are spending significant amounts of money on bottled water. However, a long-term solution to Walgett's water insecurity has not been identified.

A survey of Walgett Aboriginal community members undertaken by the Dharriwaa Elders Group and Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service in partnership with UNSW and The George Institute found that water insecurity was having severe negative effects on household expenses and food security. Some respondents reported spending up to \$50 a week on



bottled water to avoid using water from the tap which made it hard to afford healthy foods.<sup>5</sup>

The case study of water insecurity in Walgett demonstrates the importance of integrating water security, including the health of the rivers, into policies and government interventions on food security. Community involvement, including shared planning, decision-making and evaluation, must be prioritised in identifying and acting on community food and water security needs. The most effective programs integrate genuine community involvement and leadership at all stages and target the social and cultural determinants of health.<sup>13</sup>

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