



Indigenous Affairs Committee
Inquiry into Food Prices and Food Security in Remote Indigenous Communities

CRANAplus Submission

June 2020

[CRANAplus](#) is grateful for the opportunity to make this submission to the Indigenous Affairs Committee Inquiry into *Food Pricing and Food Security in Remote Indigenous Communities*. We are the peak professional body for remote, isolated and rural health professionals, and have provided nearly 40 years of education, support and professional services for the multi-disciplinary remote health workforce.

We are a not-for-profit, membership-based organisation whose mission is to promote the development and delivery of high-quality health care, including cultural safe health care to our First Nation people and others living in remote and isolated areas of Australia.

In crafting of this submission, CRANAplus has woven the story telling of our members and networks who have the lived experience of delivering health care services to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

For the purpose of this paper, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be called 'Indigenous' people.

BACKGROUND

CRANAplus acknowledges the importance of this Inquiry given the current milieu of COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the backdrop, of the first inquiry into 'Community stores in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' (2009) executed the 'Everybody's Business' Report with 33 recommendations for improving community stores, inclusive of government subsidies for freight charges; increase store licensing; and government partnership with individual communities in the decision-making process.¹

In 2009 Council of Australian Governments (COAG) launched *National Strategy for Food Security in Indigenous Communities* (part of the National Indigenous Reform agreement) (2009-2012) a nationally coordinated approach across four jurisdictions (WA, SA, NT and Qld) to improve health outcomes. The Strategy outlined 5 key areas: national standards for stores and takeaway servicing remote indigenous communities; a national quality improvement scheme for stores; incorporate stores under the Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2010; increasing indigenous Australian nutrition workforce; and a National Healthy-Eating Action Plan.^{2,3}

In 2014 the Strategy was audited and reported that there was difficulty implementing all 5 key areas with only one being successfully completed, *National Healthy Eating Action Plan*. It was recognised that the success of this Strategy was dependent upon the community store, as it is major resource for communities to source their food and essential goods.⁴

Again in 2016, Public Health Association Australia (PHAA) published a Media Release calling on the Australian Government by a coalition of health organisation stating, 'Closing the Gap needs urgent action to overcome food security'. They proposed for a sustained action and leadership from all levels of government and nongovernment organisations towards food and nutrition security based on workable approaches and have been developed with indigenous people. Furthermore, the coalition wanted food and nutrition security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be front and centre in the country's National Nutrition Policy, and in rolling out the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan.⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated this decades-old 'wicked' problem of food security in the context of remote and isolated communities. Food security has contributed significantly to the health

gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. We welcome the opportunity to unpack those issues, challenges, and provide potential solutions by addressing some of the Terms of Reference with recommendations. Thus, to enhance the betterment of long-term health outcomes of Indigenous remote communities across Australia.

CRANAplus recommends that the following recommendations are given consideration by the Indigenous Affairs Committee Inquiry into *Food Pricing and Food Security in Remote Indigenous Communities*.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Improve transport cold chain practices and procedures, such as accurate measurement of food temperature with monitoring at all steps along the cold chain.
- Increase government funding for the improvement of remote community store's infrastructure, and standard of food quality, creating a health enabling store environment.
- Continued government funding to support quality research relating to food security and food affordability to achieve a healthy diet that is obtainable for residents in remote communities.
- Explore the feasibility of a National Standards approach, that is validated, and is rigorous in data collection and analysis inclusive of metrics to measure and review against, to inform supportive actions as well as the industry and national policy.
- Review pensions and allowance for those living in remote areas to improve accessibility and affordability of fruit and vegetables and other foods, and essential household goods.
- Greater investment in public health and community nutritionist workforce to improve health and nutrition literacy in better choices of food and nutrition.
- Invest in healthy housing strategies for food preparation and storage infrastructure.
- Engage with remote community leaders, primary industries and small business development to explore the feasibility of larger-scale food production initiative(s), community-led, which has a solid economic foundation and strong business model.
- Beyond COVID-19 – the continuation of a collaboration of all stakeholders in the food supply-delivery chain inclusive of primary growers, manufacturer, wholesalers, transport operators, and major supermarkets work with remote stores and community members to support equity regarding accessibility, availability, affordability of healthy foods and essential household items.

INTRODUCTION

Colonisation has significantly impacted on traditional food practices, and the health and wellbeing of indigenous people. For generations they have experienced displacement from traditional lands, forced reliance on ‘ration’ foods, limited financial independence and the loss of language, identity, and cultural knowledge. These challenges Indigenous people have faced and are still endured today,^{6,7} with higher rates of socio-economic disadvantage and geographical, environmental and social factors, all impact on the nutritional status.

Nutritional status is intrinsically linked to food security of which there are three components (World Health Organisation 2011): food access to acquire a nutritious diet; adequate supply of food availability; and the appropriate use of food (i.e. know-how of basic nutrition and food preparation).⁸ The literature asserts there is a high prevalence of food insecurity amongst Indigenous people living in remote areas due to lower income, household infrastructure and overcrowding, storage and cooking facilities and access to transport.

National data (2012-2013) shows that more than one in five (22%) Indigenous 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 less than one in twenty (3.7%) non-indigenous Australian households that had gone without food. Indigenous people living in remote areas were more likely than those in non-remote areas to be living in a household that had run out of food and couldn’t afford to buy more (31% compared with 20%). This includes 9.2% of people in remote areas and 6.4% of people in non-remote areas who went without food when they ran out.⁹

The nutrition burden among Indigenous adults is underscored by malnutrition, which includes both over-nutrition (particularly over-consumption of unhealthy ‘discretionary’ foods) and under-nutrition (dietary deficiencies related to inadequate intake of healthy foods). Hence poor diet related chronic diseases – such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, chronic kidney disease, and some cancers – are responsible for at least 75% of the mortality gap between Indigenous people and non-indigenous Australians.¹⁰

Chronic disease burden with its aetiology in poor diet is now the leading single preventable risk factor followed by obesity. Therefore the accessibility to healthy food, and availability of food supply are major issues, remote stores are confronted with higher freight costs, limited purchasing power and maintenance issues which impacts on affordability, availability and quality of fresh fruit and vegetables, and essential household items.¹¹ Food supply can be disrupted during the wet season, where communities are cut off and road travel is inaccessible for long periods of time.

THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

The environment in which Remote Community retailers operate

The remote community store is likened to a ‘general store’ servicing small population communities in geographical isolated locations across Australia. The community store is often the only source of food, drinks and essential items, such as household goods and hardware. It is estimated Indigenous communities purchase up to around 80-95% of their food at the community store and takeaway store.¹² As well as being a meeting place for many, and for some, it is seen as a day’s outing. Thus, the community store can be viewed as an essential service for it plays a critical role in the nutritional health and wellbeing of these communities.

The types of community stores groups that operate in remote and isolated areas across Australia:

- ‘Outback’ stores – Commonwealth backed company – community-owned and operated with external management –operates in SA, NT and WA
- Mai Wiru regional stores – not-for-profit organisation – with similar to Outback stores APY Lands – SA
- ALPA – Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporations – operates in NT and Qld.
- CEQ – Community Enterprise Qld
- Independent stores - example IGA

The *Northern Territory Market Basket Survey 2017*¹³ reported on stores being an important source of employment for people in remote communities. ALPA and Outback stores have a policy for the employment of local indigenous people to work in the stores; proportion of indigenous employees is higher in stores owned (88%) or managed (76%) by a store group, such as ALPA and Outback, than other privately owned stores.

A number of factors contribute to the challenges in which remote community stores operate in, that impact on the increase in food costs and essential goods. First and foremost, high freight costs and possible delayed deliveries contribute to high prices and a limited range of foods and essential household goods. The local store is at the end of long supply chain with some stores in the Kimberley, Central Australia and Far North Queensland as far as 1,500 to 3,000 kilometres from the supplier to the store. This impacts on the price and quality of fruit and vegetables. In addition, poor store infrastructure, such as old refrigerators, and freezers, commonly occurring power outages, compromised cold chain practices.^{14,15}

Anecdotally – Refrigeration of food and cold chain practices are viewed as a major concern regarding the quality of food being affected by inconsistent temperature storage by transport suppliers and the long journey. Delivery supplies can be complicated by transport breakdowns, extreme weather – heat waves / cyclones in the wet season. Coupled with local power outages, this impacts on stores refrigerators, freezers and cold storerooms, and reduces quality of the food. Hence fruit and vegetables may be of ‘good’ quality, on day of delivery, then given the possible occurrence of power outages, these foods deteriorate quickly as there often is nowhere to store the produce (cold storeroom is full) and may pose as a public health risk. Furthermore, the maintenance for refrigeration, undertaking repairs including spare parts / equipment, is often not provided locally, requires resourcing from outside the community. This takes time and costs, and further impacts on the accessibility, affordability of food and essential items.

Given the small population size of these communities, community stores operational costs are impacted by the amount of sales, turnover of goods and the type of essential household goods required. The economy of scale in turn influences the amount of purchasing power they can leverage for better prices, in comparison to the regional supermarket chains. Based on this premise, there is a price inequity for remote community stores, which is further compounded by higher freight and operating costs; thereby residents pay considerably more than their regional, rural or urban counterparts.

Testimonials from health professionals employed in remote and isolated health clinics within indigenous communities:

I am working in xxxx in the Kimberley and find access to healthy food is adequate but very overpriced mainly in IGA. We also service xxxx a remote Aboriginal community, where they try to stock healthy foods but are still over-priced.

..... work in Fitzroy Crossing in WA and are often bewildered at the prices and quality of groceries here.

These testimonials are not unique to Western Australia but are universally echoed by health professionals working in Indigenous communities across remote and isolated locations of Australia.

Recommendations:

- Improve transport cold chain practices and procedures, such as accurate measurement of food temperature with monitoring at all steps along the cold chain.
- Increase government funding for the improvement of remote community store’s infrastructure, and standard of food quality, creating a health enabling store environment.

Comparative pricing in other non-indigenous remote communities and regional centres

As previously commented local remote residents pay substantially more; food and essential items are consistently higher than their regional, rural or urban counterparts. This disparity in cost between urban and remote settings and has remained relatively unchanged for many years with often the more remote, the more disadvantaged.¹⁶

To substantiate the cost disparity, it is evidenced by The *Northern Territory Market Basket Survey 2017*¹⁷ where 71 remote stores across Northern Territory were survey inclusive of Darwin, East Arnhem, Katherine, Barkly and Alice Springs districts. As well as a supermarket and corner store in the major town/ in each of the district centres were also surveyed for comparison.

The results showed ‘on average Healthy Food Basket in remote stores was 60% more expensive than in the district centre supermarkets and 22% higher than the average of the district centre corner store. On average the Current Food Basket in remote stores was 40% more expensive than in the district centre supermarkets and 22% higher than the average of the district centre corner stores.’

The Current Food Basket is based on the average food diet indigenous consume, contains both healthy and unhealthy foods as categorised by the Australian Bureau of Statistics

The Northern Territory has been consistent over the past two decades in undertaking food pricing surveys in comparison with other jurisdictions. The factors that affect food security and food pricing are complex. Therefore, there is a need for a national standard approach to food pricing surveys across all jurisdictions for comparison reasons, that reports regularly on the affordability, availability and quality of food in remote communities and regional centres for the purpose of informing the industry and national policy.

Recommendations:

- Continued government funding to support quality research relating to food security and food affordability to achieve a healthy diet that is obtainable for residents in remote communities.
- Explore the feasibility of a National Standards approach, that is validated, and is rigorous in data collection and analysis inclusive of metrics to measure and review against, to inform supportive actions as well as the industry and national policy.

Barriers facing residents in remote communities from having reliable access to affordable fresh and healthy food, groceries and other essential supplies

CRANAplus acknowledges that there are many barriers residents face in remote communities from having reliable access to affordable fresh and healthy food, groceries and household essential items. We acknowledge the Indigenous people, traditional owners of the land, for their strength and resilience who continue to face these challenges daily.

It is well known that people living in remote areas experience higher rates of socio-economic disadvantage including lower incomes and educational attainment, higher unemployment, disruption to family structure and poorer access to adequate housing and access to healthy affordable food.¹⁸

With limited employment opportunities in remote communities, a high proportion of residents rely on government pensions or allowances, as their main source of income. Statistically, a higher proportion of Indigenous people aged 15 and over receive a government support as their main source of income (52%), this increases with remoteness, compared with non-Indigenous people (25%).¹⁹ With higher prices for fruit and vegetables and other food supplies in remote stores, Indigenous people spend a greater proportion of their disposable income on meals. This predicament will undoubtedly influence the eating habits and behaviours of Indigenous people, as they do for non-Indigenous people.

In past assessments of store turnover more than half the energy in community diet was derived from white flour, white rice, tinned meat and vegetable oil. Research shows that diets are now higher in sugar, white bread and flour-based foods along with sugary sweetened drinks and a greater reliance on nutritionally poor 'convenience', take away foods and 'fast foods'²⁰

Anecdotally – Due to minimal disposable income, and shopping habits, people often shop daily. Factors which influence this includes poor housing infrastructure such as a working refrigerator, stove or oven for the preparation of food and consumption, running water and adequate storage for food. In addition, some residents are unable to pay for electricity or have hot or cold running water. This encourages a reliance of ready-made and often nutritionally poor foods.

Public health and community nutritionists in remote communities play a vital role within remote communities as they work with store owners and community members to create a supportive environment to improve nutrition literacy regarding food choices and nutrition. They assist store owners to improve food supply and preference to foods available for sale are consistent with dietary recommendations and in-store nutrition promotions and community interventions to increase the demand of healthy food.²¹ Anecdotally – there needs to be more nutritionists in remote and isolated communities working with store owners and community members to improve nutrition literacy for the betterment of long-term health and wellbeing.

Recommendations:

- Review pensions and allowance for those living in remote areas to improve accessibility and affordability of fruit and vegetables and other foods and essential household goods.
- Greater investment in public health and community nutritionist workforce to improve health and nutrition literacy in better choices of food and nutrition.
- Invest in healthy housing strategies for food preparation and storage infrastructure.

The availability and demand for locally produced food in remote communities

The *Review of nutrition among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people* Report (2016) reports that 'community gardens projects/ programs are often viewed as a solution to addressing food security (access, availability, utilisation and stability) in remote Indigenous communities. In Torres Strait Islander communities there was substantial evidence of home gardens being an effective way of food security in comparison to the Central Australia and the Kimberley region. The reason for the limited success was due to the relatively infertile soil, effect of insects and other pests as well as agriculture can be inconsistent with the mobility associated with Indigenous cultural life. School gardens are

popular alternative to community gardens, as they are easier to coordinate and managed on a daily basis by students and teachers'.²²

CRANAplus strongly supports sustainable food security; where there is interest by the community and is community-led, larger-scale food production programs for local consumption. For sustainability there needs to be government investment, which has a solid economic foundation and strong business model. It is with interest to note that²³ nutrition for Indigenous communities remains fragmented, lack of sufficient resources, and co-ordination and are largely with limited success in Australia.

The development of larger-scale, traditional and contemporary food production, with an integrated community-led approach would certainly boost the economy of the local area(s), employment and food security for our remote communities. CRANAplus strongly believes that priority needs to be given to ensuring sustainability and access to traditional foods continues for Indigenous people today.

Recommendation:

- Engage with remote community leaders, primary industries and small business development to explore the feasibility of larger-scale food production initiative(s), community-led, which has a solid economic foundation and strong business model.

The role of Australia's food and grocery manufacturer and suppliers in ensuring adequate supply to Remote Communities, including:

- **challenges presented by the wet season in Northern Australia as well as any locational disadvantages and transport infrastructure issues that might be relevant.**
- **Identifying pathways toward greater cooperation in the sector to improve supply**

Food supply can be disrupted during the wet season, where communities are cut off and inaccessible by road for long periods of time, [anecdotally] due to no road repairs, has been known to be up to five months in the Cape, Far North Queensland, and in the Kimberley region for seven months of the year. During Cyclone season / wet season stores are well aware to stock up on tin food, rice and water as they are limited to the amount of available fresh food as they need to be flown in.

In response to COVID-19, Aboriginal leaders and agencies such as AMSANT, ACCHO and NACCHO to name a few, were influential in demanding for State and Federal governments to act swiftly to 'lock-down' Indigenous communities across Australia for health safety reasons. During the early days of the outbreak of COVID where consumers were panic buying and 'stock piling' of food and household goods, this behaviour impacted and disrupted supplies 'down-stream'. Communities in regional and remote areas were faced the prospect of running out of food.

In March 2020, the ABC²⁴ reported on a small community of 130 people in Ghan Ghan, about four-hour drive from south of Nhulunbuy, Northern Territory, where community members were very concerned about the limited food supply and estimated the town had less than a week's food left.

It was reported that Nhulunbuy residents were 'panic buying' at the local Woolworth's Supermarket. The Supermarket had placed a limitation on the volume of goods an individual could purchase, at one time. This action by the supermarket impacted heavily on remote communities like Ghan Ghan residents, who needed to shop in regional townships, to buy large quantities (bulk) of stable foods, fruit and vegetables, as their shopping opportunities and transport are limited due to the tyranny of distance. Furthermore, ABC reported Ghan Ghan residents were gravely concerned about supermarket restrictions that local residents were at risk of malnutrition and skipping meals.

This is only one example of a prevalent story, reflective in many remote communities during the early stage of COVID-19.

In recognising the issue of food security, Minister for Indigenous Australian, Mr Ken Wyatt released a Statement, in April 2020 ²⁵, announcing the establishment of the Supermarket Taskforce and NIAA Food Security Working Group to closely monitor specific issues facing remote communities to ensure the ongoing security of food and basic supplies. We understand that the Emergency Food Relief for remote and isolated communities has been successful.

CRANAplus believes that food security in remote Indigenous communities continues to be decades-old problem; beyond COVID-19 requires systematic approach from government.

Recommendation:

- Beyond COVID-19 – the continuation of a collaboration of all stakeholders in the food supply–delivery chain inclusive of primary growers, manufacturer, wholesalers, transport operators, and major supermarkets work with remote stores and community members to support equity regarding accessibility, availability, affordability of healthy foods and essential household items.

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