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Submission to the Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities - Parliament of Australia.

We make this submission as a group of collaborating Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics and postgraduate scholars and local research partners with disciplinary backgrounds in applied anthropology, nutrition, fisheries and food security and Indigenous enterprise development. Our research and teaching focuses on issues of Indigenous wellbeing, food security and livelihoods, policy, and social justice in the Northern Territory (NT), Australia. Our research includes PhD studies into Indigenous perspectives of wellbeing and seafood, and fisheries, food security and nutritional outcomes in rural communities and a recently completed collaborative pilot research activity with Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (BAC) and Traditional Owners (TO) to investigate ways to further support food security, health and wellbeing associated with commercially available seafood in Indigenous communities.

The Terms of Reference for the House Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities outline several areas for consideration. We have identified some key issues of relevance to this Inquiry arising from our research activity.

Our submission relates to the demand and availability of fresh and healthy locally sourced foods in particular seafood, the barriers to remote Indigenous communities accessing fresh affordable culturally appropriate seafood and barriers existing to support and supply seafoods.

Summary

There is a need for targeted initiatives and policies to improve access and availability of locally sourced and affordable seafood in remote Indigenous communities in the NT. These actions should support higher fish consumption, which will ultimately contribute to improved diets, and reductions in burden of non-communicable disease to Aboriginal people and contribute towards Closing the Gap targets. These include a whole of community approach to development of food enterprises and seafood in remote communities, addressing barriers to food safety and handling laws which influence the sale of locally caught seafood and implementation of other culturally embedded approaches to support small scale fisheries enterprises owned and implemented by Indigenous people to deliver a range of other co-benefits.

Background

As stated in the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in all decisions that affect them and have the right to self-determination. Indigenous Peoples' food systems have emerged from long-evolved cultures and patterns of living in local ecosystems and embedded specialised knowledge. Despite the depth of knowledge Indigenous people have of their local environment and food system, they often face challenges derived from extreme poverty, marginalization and discrimination within the larger

society in which they live (Kuhnlein et al., 2009). It is recognised that increasing traditional food availability and access in Indigenous communities is a sound strategy to improve diets and health outcomes (Egeland and Harrison, 2013; Kuhnlein et al., 2006). Food insecurity is widespread in Australia's First Nations remote communities with reports of 67% of adults experiencing food insecurity (Brimblecombe et al., 2018). Access to traditional food is providing a safety net for families at these too frequent times when households run out of money to buy food (Ferguson et al., 2017). Protecting Indigenous peoples' food systems, continuation of tradition, preservation and connection with ancestral lands and knowledge is important for food security.

There are known factors that contribute to disadvantage in remote Aboriginal communities in the NT. Lack of housing, access to health facilities and lack of employment are some evident socio-economic factors that directly or indirectly contribute to the health inequity in the NT (Zhao et al., 2013). This health inequity further contributes to the chronic disease burden for Aboriginal people residing in remote communities. As a result, chronic disease is affecting the lives of Aboriginal people through impairment of mobility and cognitive function; this denies Aboriginal people the basic human right of accessing nutritious food as well as disconnecting Aboriginal people from cultural roles, adversely affecting intergenerational knowledge transfer (Cubillo et al., 2020).

While addressing all the social-economical determinants is beyond the scope of this Inquiry there are initiatives that can contribute to addressing disadvantage. This includes accessibility to locally sourced food and enhanced local economy with the added positive public health correlation and continuation of connection to culturally appropriate foods.

It is imperative to increase the supply of fresh nutritious food in remote Aboriginal communities. It has been reported, based on store purchasing data, that at a population level there are low levels of high-quality protein and key micronutrients available; therefore, this should be addressed as an issue of high importance (Brimblecombe et al, 2013).

Nutritional benefits of fish and development of Indigenous fisheries

Fish are an animal-source protein, as well as a rich source of omega-3 fatty acids and micronutrients such as heme iron, iodine, vitamins A, B12 and D, calcium and selenium (Roos et al., 2007; HLPE, 2014; Bogard et al., 2015). Given this nutritional profile, consumption of fish can contribute to improved dietary quality across all population sectors, but especially women and children (Hicks et al., 2019). Locally caught (or potentially locally caught or gathered) seafood has traditionally been gathered, harvested and shared (within an economy of reciprocity) as part of traditional systems in remote Indigenous communities in the NT.

The development of culturally-aligned fisheries and aquaculture businesses on Aboriginal owned and managed land and sea are recognised as an important element of Indigenous socio-economic advancement in Australia. In coastal regions of northern Australia this is possible due to the relative abundance of Indigenous owned natural assets and the cultural, social and practices, knowledge and connections to country developed over thousands of years of habitation. However, until recently, Aboriginal Traditional Owners and their families have had limited engagement in the mainstream commercial coastal fisheries sector.

The Blue Mud Bay High Court decision of 2008 recognised significant Indigenous property rights to most of the intertidal zone (approximately 84% or 6,000 km) of the NT coast. This opened greater opportunities for Indigenous participation in commercial fisheries (and other marine related enterprises). The Northern Territory Government (NTG) under the NT Fisheries Act (1988) amended the existing Aboriginal Coastal Fishing Licenses (ACL) provisions in 2015 (sections 186-188), with aim

of creating a transitional pathway to improve Aboriginal participation in commercial fisheries engagement.¹ This occurred alongside some capacity building initiatives under the NTG Indigenous fisheries training mentor program in 2015. Previously, under the NT Fisheries Act introduced in the early 1990s there was provision for Aboriginal community fishing licences but there were considerable restrictions in terms of net size, fish could not be sold outside of the community and only one licence could be held per community. The ACL regulations allow for multiple licenses per community.

Small-scale Indigenous Fishing enterprises in the NT

The development of Aboriginal fishing businesses in the NT are broadly aimed at improving the livelihoods of Aboriginal community members by providing economic development pathways and the nutritional health and wellbeing of the wider community through providing access to a nutritious, diverse and culturally aligned food supply.

Over the last five years some Indigenous communities have established small-scale commercial fishing enterprises. The most successful and consistent to date has been operating in the community of Maningrida in the NT since 2016. The enterprise is operated under Aboriginal coastal fishing licenses (ACL) held by three Aboriginal Traditional Owners (TO) with support from BAC and the Commonwealth CDP program and the NTG Indigenous fisheries program. The TOs were motivated to provide a regular supply of local fish for the community and to provide culturally attractive employment opportunities for family members.

Generally, a team goes fishing two to four days a week. A small number of fish (and the less valuable or damaged fish) are kept aside by the fishing team as take-home food. This is permitted under Section 53 of NT Fishing Act which defines traditional fishing. The common fish species caught are:

- Blue Tail Mullet (*Moolgarda burchanani*)
- Diamond Mullet (*Liza vaigiensis*)
- Golden Trevally (*Gnathanodo speciosus*)
- Milkfish (*Chanos chanos*)
- Barracuda (*Sphyraena barracuda*)
- Queenfish (*Scomberoides commersonnianus*)
- Blue Threadfin (*Eleutheronema tetradactylum*)
- Whiting (*Sillago sihama*)

Most of the fish catch is sold to community members in Maningrida providing the only commercially available fresh local seafood. The fish is sold fresh each week on Thursday nights from a stall outside the Maningrida supermarket at \$12.00 per kilogram. If there is any fish remaining after the market night, the crew drives around the community and sells fish packed in plastic bags directly from an esky. Blue tail mullet is usually the fish of choice for local Aboriginal community members. The most common way to cook the fish seems to be to wrap it in foil and cook it on coals in an outside fire. The \$12.00 per kilogram is a very competitive price compared to most animal-source / protein foods available in Maningrida and is therefore a favoured meal for many community members.

In the dry season, the Maningrida fishermen also drive to Ramingining community (a 2 hour drive accessible in dry season only) and set up a stall at the front of the Ramingining Council offices.

¹ Refer to NT Government website for details on ACL, <https://nt.gov.au/marine/commercial-fishing/aboriginal-coastal-fishing-licences>

The ACL fisheries enterprise economic mix includes government supported CDP participants, market-based economic activity (sales of fish) and the active use of customary knowledge and skills and social relations during the fishing operation and legal recognition of Indigenous land and sea rights. The enterprise is underpinned by success factors including: cultural alignment; strong social relationships; government support through CDP; strong TO leadership; the need for more nutritious food; community enthusiasm to consume local food (bush tucker); and local market demand. The benefits generated include the maintenance of customary knowledge, skills and social relations; culturally appropriate employment; and a regular supply of affordable, fresh fish offering positive health benefits.

Constraints and opportunities to support availability of locally caught seafood and food security

The BAC has invested significant resources into the establishment and operation of the Maningrida ACL fishery enterprise, which generates a range of benefits to Maningrida people. These include flexible employment, regular supply of affordable, locally sourced, fresh fish offering the positive health benefit of delivering more fresh fish into local diets. Realization of Indigenous rights in the intertidal zone in the NT allows for development of culturally aligned Indigenous seafood enterprises, to deliver culturally sustainable jobs, improved nutrition, and food security.

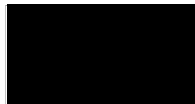
However, a range of initiatives are needed to address the current barriers to maximising the health and wellbeing and other co-benefits from the availability of locally caught and sold seafood and increase food security in Maningrida and other remote communities seeking to develop similar enterprises. These include:

1. Assessment of the culturally appropriate food preferences of remote Indigenous people and other local consumers for fish/seafood along the value chain in different communities/contexts. There are different consumer consumption preferences for the species caught, with local community members often preferring whole fish but the stores or other organizations, such as Aged Care Facility or the School Nutrition Program, preferring fillets.
2. Promote a whole-of-community approach to development of food enterprises and seafood. Many government-funded organisations (aged-care facility, school, etc) purchase imported frozen seafood at prices that are hard to compete with for Aboriginal fishing businesses. Government-funded organisations could be provided with incentives to use local seafood. Managers of stores ordering food supplies are also usually non-local and have a very limited knowledge of community food preferences or cooking techniques. A strong involvement of local people in ordering and cooking foods would have wide benefits in terms of empowering local people to promote healthy foods. A whole-of-community approach to the development of food enterprises would be generally very helpful, with local community organisations consulted and encouraged to support the development of the enterprises.
3. Food safety and handling laws influence the product to be sold. Grocery stores and take-away stores need to apply for a fish retailer licence to sell fish. These licences require certain conditions to be met and some stores are reluctant to increase their regulatory workload. To be able to process or cook fish a food business registration is required which requires significant investment into suitable facilities and processes, which can be hard to meet and very hard to navigate for local Aboriginal people. This is one reason why the focus to date has been on whole fish sales outside the store and mobile community sales.

4. Assessment of the policy opportunities to address barriers (regulatory and programmatic) that exist around remote Aboriginal people fishing, purchasing and consuming fish/seafood in local contexts.
5. Innovative approaches to physical assets and infrastructure to support supply of locally sourced seafood, such as the maintenance of specialised equipment such as nets, ice-making machines and fishing vessels, which is also a major challenge in remote communities.

There is no single successful strategy to make a difference in Indigenous communities' health, rather multiple strategies are required to help close the gap in nutrition-related chronic diseases. Yet, collaborative approaches are essential. Evidence suggests that programs will be likely to make an impact when Indigenous peoples' perspectives are considered, and whole-of-community partnerships between and among community members and stakeholders (e.g. nutritionists, health care providers, industry, government and non- government organisations) are considered to drive decision making and nutrition sensitive initiatives (Egeland and Harrison, 2013; Brimblecombe et al. 2017).

Yours sincerely



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