



1st November 2024

Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Email: northernaustralia.joint@aph.gov.au

Re: Energy, food and water security inquiry

The Remote Food Security Project team, a collaborative conducting food security research in partnership with remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Energy, food and water security inquiry. Our collaborative comprises members, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members, from Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations in Queensland, Apunipima Cape York Health Council, and the Northern Territory, Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, and Australian and International public health academics.

This submission is informed by the findings from the Remote Food Security research project and reports on published and unpublished data generated from this National Health and Medical Research Council funded study.

We focus our response on the priorities and solutions to improve food security in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, identified by community members and leaders from remote communities in Cape York and Central Australia who have been involved in this project.

Thank you for considering our response. For further information please contact:

Megan Ferguson, The University of Queensland

Response to the Energy, food and water security inquiry

Our response to this inquiry is presented in two parts: 1. Remote Food Security Project overview and 2. Response to the inquiry Terms of Reference a, b and c.

1. The Remote Food Security Project

The Remote Food Security Project¹ is a collaborative research study that resulted from a call to action by Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations; Apunipima Cape York Health Council in Queensland and Central Australian Aboriginal Congress in the Northern Territory, who identified food security in remote communities as a priority for action. Together with The University of Queensland and academic partners, a co-designed research project was implemented to determine community-led solutions to improve food security in Cape York and Central Australia.

A two-year phase of local data collection (2021-2022) with eight remote communities in Cape York and Central Australia included testing the impact of a discount on healthy food on the diet quality of women and children and healthy food affordability, interviews with parents and carers to learn about the lived experience of food insecurity², and a photovoice study³ to identify priorities and solutions for improving food security. Building on the research phase, community leaders determined the priorities for improving food security in their community. In February 2023 representatives from 10 communities across both regions came together at a Knowledge Exchange where they determined collective priorities and solutions to inform a community-led framework to improve food security in Cape York and Central Australia.

Findings from the Remote Food Security Project, including videos where you can hear directly from community members about the priorities and solutions for improving food security, can be accessed on the project webpage: <https://public-health.uq.edu.au/remote-food-security>

2. Response to the inquiry Terms of Reference

- a. The context and extent of energy, food and water security in Northern Australia**
- b. The challenges and potential actions to improving energy, food and water security**
- c. The impact this has on communities, particularly remote communities.**

Remote Food Security Project evidence:

Food security

Baseline data⁴ was collected across eight remote communities, with 477 pregnant and breastfeeding women and children aged six months to five years, from 294 households.

Affordability of a healthy diet

Food was unaffordable for residents receiving social security income and was higher than the regional town centres of Alice Springs and Cairns. A family would have to spend approximately 40% of their

income on a healthy food basket in Central Australia and 38% in Cape York. Expenditure above 25% of household income indicates food stress⁵ and above 30% is considered unaffordable.⁶

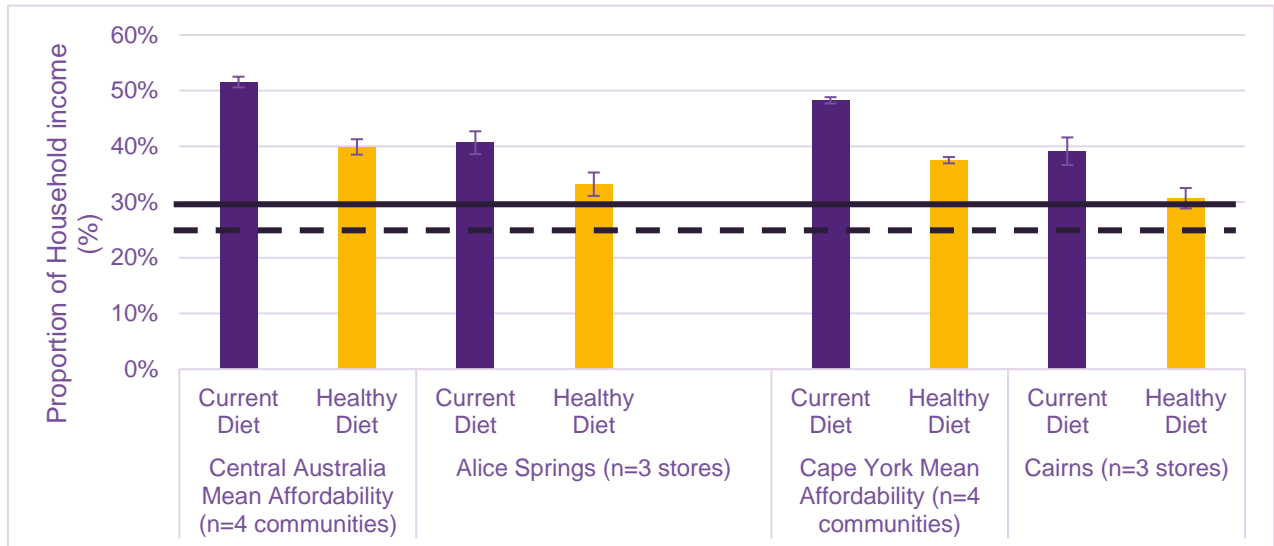


Figure 1. Affordability of current and healthy diets for families receiving social security income only in Central Australian and Cape York communities, compared with the nearest major centres.

Food security prevalence

Three out of four families (76%) reported experiencing food insecurity. This is higher than the most recent national statistics which reported 31% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities to be food insecure.⁷

Table 1. Food security status of participant households in Central Australian and Cape York communities.

	Food security status (% of families)	Degree of food security (% of families)
Food secure	24%	High food security 24%
Food insecure	76%	Marginal food security 28%
		Low food security 20%
		Very low food security 28%

Diet quality of women and children

Food insecurity impacts the ability to consume a diet that supports health and wellbeing. The diet reported for women and children did not meet the Australian Dietary Guidelines recommendations. Children under five years were meeting the recommended intake for most food groups, except for vegetables. However, pregnant and breastfeeding mothers reported not eating enough of most food groups (fruit, vegetables, grains and dairy).

Table 2. Reported intake compared with the Australian Dietary Guideline (ADG) recommended intakes, in Central Australian and Cape York communities, by age group.

Food Group	Children < 2 years		Children 2-5 years		Pregnant & breastfeeding women	
	Serves, mean (SD) n= 108	ADG serves	Serves, mean (SD) n= 202	ADG serves	Serves, mean (SD) n=161	ADG serves
Vegetables	1.3 (0.9)	0.4-3.0	1.4 (1.0)	2.5-4.5	1.8 (1.3)	5.0-7.5
Fruit	1.0 (0.9)	0.07-0.5	1.8 (1.3)	1.0-1.5	1.1 (1.1)	2.0
Grain	3.1 (1.6)	2.5-4.0	3.8 (1.2)	4.0	4.9 (1.9)	8.5-9.0
Meat	1.1 (0.6)	0.5-1.0	1.5 (0.5)	1.0-1.5	3.1 (1.3)	2.5-3.5
Dairy	2.0 (1.6)	1.0-1.5	2.4 (1.4)	1.5-2.0	1.9 (1.4)	2.5
SSB	0.3 (0.4)	0.0	0.5 (0.6)	0.0	0.8 (0.9)	0.0
Discretionary	1.9 (1.4)	0.0	3.1 (1.5)	0.0-1.0	3.6 (1.7)	0.0-2.5

Note: Green cells indicate participants were on average meeting the recommended intakes, yellow they were close to meeting, and red they were far from meeting recommended intakes.

Remote Food Security Project: Community-led framework

Community representatives identified five priority areas and a number of potential solutions to address these priorities:

- Healthy food prices
- Supply and range of quality foods
- Car and road condition, and access to transport
- Income, employment and training
- Education- health promotion.

Energy security

Energy security (the cost and availability of power) was identified by community members and representatives as being linked to food security, with participants of the photovoice project³ and lived experience interviews² describing power as being expensive and often competing with other costs of living (such as food), and the impacts of the power running out on food storage and preparation/cooking. Participants talked about the continuation of the power rebate that exists in Cape York as a solution to improving power affordability. At the Knowledge Exchange, community representatives identified power and gas a priority area impacting on food security.⁸ Proposed solutions included; making power more affordable, increasing solar and/or wind power in communities, good insulation of houses and back-up generators.⁸

Water security

Water quality and quantity was also determined by community representatives at the Knowledge Exchange to be a priority area for improving food security, particularly for communities with greater concerns regarding the quality/quantity of their water supply, with potential solutions including the use of rainwater tanks, and filters to improve water quality and reduce excess minerals. ⁸

References

1. Ferguson M, Tonkin E, Brimblecombe J, Lee A, Fredericks B, Cullerton K., Mah, C., Brown, C., McMahon, E., Chatfield, D., Miles, E., Cadet-James, Y. [Communities Setting the Direction for Their Right to Nutritious, Affordable Food: Co-Design of the Remote Food Security Project in Australian Indigenous Communities.](#) Int J Environ Res Public Health. 2023 Feb;20(4):2936.
2. Booth S, Deen C, Thompson K, Kleve S, Chan E, McCarthy L, Kraft E, Fredericks B, Brimblecombe J, Ferguson M. [Conceptualisation, experiences and suggestions for improvement of food security amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers in remote Australian communities.](#) Soc Sci Med. 2023 Mar;320:115726.
3. Chappell, E., Chan, E., Deen, C. Brimblecombe, J., Cadet-James, Y., Hefler, M., Stubbs, E., Ferguson, M. [Using photovoice to generate solutions to improve food security among families living in remote Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia.](#) BMC Public Health. 2024 Mar;785
4. The Remote Food Security Team. Submission 19 to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, Inquiry into food security in Australia. 2022. Available from: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Agriculture/FoodsecurityinAustralia/Submissions
5. Landrigan T, Kerr D, Dhaliwal S, et al. Removing the Australian tax exemption on healthy food adds food stress to families vulnerable to poor nutrition. Aust N Z J Public Health. 2017;41:591-597
6. Lee A, Lewis M. Testing the Price of Healthy and Current Diets in Remote Aboriginal Communities to Improve Food Security: Development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healthy Diets ASAP (Australian Standardised Affordability and Pricing) Methods. Int J Environ Res Public Health. 2018;15:2912
7. Australian Bureau of Statistics. 4727.0.55.005 - Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey: Nutrition Results - Food and Nutrients, 2012-13. Canberra; ABS, 2015
8. Remote Food Security Collaborative. Remote Food Security Project. Unpublished data. 2023.