

Dr Kilian Perrem | Inquiry Secretary
Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs
Department of the House of Representatives
PO Box 6021 | R1.108 Parliament House | Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Dr. Perrem

food prices and food security in remote communities

I write as a private citizen resident in Yirrkala since May 1995. During this whole period I have been living in Yirrkala I have been dismayed at the restrictive range of unhealthy foods and the exploitative prices charged at the Yirrkala Community shop.

Until a national media expose in Dec 2015 it was the common practice of the owners of the store to stock the shop with expired goods. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-12-03/yirrkala-community-store-lease-under-review-after-food-scandal/6991104>

The fact that this practice was so long standing gives some indication of the level of institutional indifference to the substandard nutrition being afforded generations of young Yolŋu children.

Whilst the expiry date issue seems to have been met the ongoing paucity of choice and exorbitant mark-ups indicate that the cynical profit motive is all that drives this business.

This shop provides an excellent case study as unlike most remote stores who use the excuse of freight and supply chains there is a ready comparison at the local Woolworths locate din the adjacent mining town of Nhulunbuy 18 km away.

I would invite the committee to conduct an anonymous random sampling of identical baskets of goods between the two locations to provide an almost laboratory standard experiment.

Many Yolŋu have no vehicle to access the Nhulunbuy Woolies. Taxis charge \$100 for a round trip in another example of laissez-faire market based government neglect.

What is more disappointing is that Yolŋu (who have to buy power cards to keep a fridge running and live communally with an obligation to share everything) have no ability to store food safely. In this context ready to eat prepared food is one of the main sources of food for families. The main option presented is deep fried chicken, sugared drinks, chips and lollies.

The effect of the government's complacent reliance on profit –based unregulated solutions to remote community nutrition is writ large in health statistics.

The other dimension to the lack of oversight or concern from the myriad government agencies who could have but have failed to take positive imaginative pro-active steps to remedy this is that the prices charged for the laughable service are clearly exploitative.

The effect of this is that the impoverished residents of Yirrkala are directed to the cheapest options to allay hunger which are invariably the unhealthiest.

In closing I would like to thank the Committee for turning their attention to this issue which although unlikely to arouse much interest in the broader community is at the core of many of the problems faced by Indigenous families trying to live in remote communities.

I believe in market forces and accept that the customers are making unhealthy choices. I understand that freight costs are huge. I know that it is very hard to engage Yolngu in employment. I understand that landowners may not make choices of tenants for the shop based on community welfare but on the basis of financial self-interest whether through official channels or otherwise. I do not seek a misguided well meaning government managed program that looks good but does nothing.

But through incentives and sanctions directed solely at this category of retail outlet it could become an attractive space for innovative, community minded enterprises to use imaginative approaches to break this cycle which entrenches poverty and ill health into the future even whilst hundreds if not thousands of bureaucrats are employed to avoid this very outcome.

Thanks.

