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27 September 2024

Ref: HWQLD/24/374

Committee Chair
Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA   ACT   2600

Email: northernaustralia.joint@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Chair

Re: Inquiry into energy, food and water security in Northern Australia

Health and Wellbeing Queensland (HWQld) appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia's inquiry into energy, food and water security. This submission represents the views of HWQld as a statutory authority and is not intended to represent the views of the Queensland Government.

HWQld was established on 1 July 2019 as an independent statutory body within the health portfolio of the Queensland Government. HWQld's objective is to improve the health and wellbeing of the Queensland population by reducing health inequity and the burden of chronic diseases, with an initial focus on physical activity, nutrition and wellbeing.

HWQld is committed to creating a healthier and fairer future for Queenslanders and has accomplished much since its establishment in 2019. In November 2023, the Queensland Government released *Gather + Grow 2023-2032*, the Queensland Government's long-term strategy to improve and sustain food security in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Queensland. *Gather + Grow 2023-2032*, will be delivered across three action plans, cultivating whole-of-system change. The first of the action plans, *Gather + Grow Action Plan 2023-2026* will deliver 23 actions across the four priority areas through collaboration across 17 local, state, and federal government agencies.

HWQld's response to the Northen Australia energy, food and water security inquiry is enclosed, and focuses on food security and health, in alignment with our agency's remit. The response is based on research and data, and draws on our experience, as a statutory body, working in an agile and evidence-based way to deliver positive health and wellbeing outcomes for Queenslanders.

HWQld's key recommendations for the inquiry are:

- **Empower local communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples** to participate in all elements of food security policy, in alignment with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.
- **Ensure policy coherence** across national, state and local governments to create integrated and coordinated food security action.
- **Incorporate food security considerations** into climate change strategies to address both immediate and long-term impacts.
- **Improve food affordability** through measures to increase income and reduce the cost of healthy food, especially in remote areas of the Far North.
- **Implement and report on recommendations** from recent food security inquiries to ensure actionable outcomes.
- **Enhance monitoring and surveillance** of food security and its determinants to improve evidence and data about access to culturally appropriate and healthy foods.

Should you require information in relation to this matter, please contact Ms Gemma Hodgetts, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, HWQld,

Yours sincerely

Dr Robyn Littlewood
Chief Executive Officer
Health and Wellbeing Queensland

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1 Organisation Overview

1.1 Health and Wellbeing Queensland

Health and Wellbeing Queensland (HWQld) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the inquiry into Energy, Food, and Water security in Northern Australia.

HWQld is established under the *Health and Wellbeing Queensland Act 2019*. In line with its legislated remit, HWQld is committed to improving the health and wellbeing of all Queenslanders by reducing health inequity and the burden of chronic disease. A key focus of HWQld is addressing food insecurity, which is fundamental to healthy diets, health inequity and improving outcomes in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

HWQld is an independent statutory body and this submission does not represent the views of the Queensland Government.

While HWQld acknowledges the significance of energy and water security and the deep connection between these factors and food security, our response to the Terms of References (ToR) for this inquiry will centre on food security and its impact on health, in line with HWQld's remit.

Gather + Grow

HWQld leads the coordination and delivery of *Gather + Grow 2023-2032* and its *Action Plan 2023 - 2026*. *Gather + Grow 2023-2032* is the Queensland Government's plan to improve food security in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with a focus on North Queensland. It was developed through partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and in collaboration with stakeholders across sectors and government. *Gather + Grow 2023-2032* is part of the Queensland Government's commitment to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and prioritises co-leadership across sectors, with a focus on evidence-based, locally driven health initiatives for sustainable outcomes.

Gather + Grow 2023-2032 outlines a whole-of-system approach to improve food security across four community-identified priority areas:
1. Optimising supply chain performance, resilience and logistics to ensure quality, affordable, healthy food is consistently available year-round.
2. Improving the accessibility and availability of healthy food by creating supportive settings for sustainable local food production.
3. Empowering communities to choose and prepare healthy food by building awareness, capability and environments for good nutrition.
4. Supporting healthy homes that enable the use of healthy food with reliable and functional facilities and equipment (for example, working fridges and cooktops).

HWQld has also provided input to the National Indigenous Australians Agency on the National Strategy for Food Security in Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities Discussion Paper. This assists in ensuring alignment across agencies, fostering a coordinated approach to addressing food security and supporting sustainable solutions in these communities.

Equity Framework

Food security, including access to healthy foods, is fundamental to addressing healthy inequity. HWQld has recently released its Equity Framework, an online resource and policy-informing piece that discusses the causes of inequity in Queensland and what measures should be taken to address this issue. The Equity Framework was developed collaboratively with Queensland Government and non-government partners and is based on extensive research and consultation with Queensland community members. HWQld suggests equity is an important

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consideration for the inquiry into energy, food and water security in Northern Australia and provides its Equity Framework to help inform this consideration.

2 Food Security and Health

Relevance to Terms of Reference:
(a) the context and extent of energy, food and water security in Northern Australia
(c) the impact this has on communities, particularly remote communities
(d) relevant Closing the Gap targets (these are: Target Outcome 1: Everyone enjoys a long and healthy life, Target Outcome 2: Children are Born healthy and strong, Target Outcome 4; Children thrive in their early years).

2.1 Prevalence of people living with food insecurity

HWQld supports the United Nations definition of food security which is "when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life"[1,2]. HWQld emphasises the need for community consultation to ensure that all policy, including policy aiming to improve food security, genuinely reflects the experiences of those most affected.

Access to nutritious food is essential for community health. However, many Queenslanders, particularly those in remote Far North Queensland (FNQ), face barriers to eating well. Nationally, there is a lack of up-to-date data on food security, but current evidence highlights the existence of food insecurity, especially among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in remote Northern areas[3]. According to data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2012, one-third of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in remote areas experienced food insecurity, compared to 4% of the general population. However, it is well accepted that the prevalence is far greater than this. Some studies have shown food insecurity to be as high as 76% amongst families in Northern Australia[4]. For people living in FNQ, the risk of food insecurity is 20% higher than in other regions, with healthy food costing 50% more than in Brisbane. Historical, socioeconomic, environmental, and geographic factors contribute to the increased prevalence of food insecurity in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities[5,6]. There are various systemic inequities that contribute to food insecurity in remote communities, with lower average family income and elevated expenses of goods being two significant drivers.[7,8]

It is widely accepted that households spending more than 25% to 30% of household disposable income on food are in "food stress"[9]. This experience of "food stress" increases the risk of food insecurity. A 2022 study found that many households in the Torres Strait Islands cannot afford healthy diets[10]. In the Torres Strait, households on the median income need to spend 35% of their gross income on food, while those on welfare need to spend 48%, making healthy eating unattainable for many families[12]. The disparity between the cost of food and income leads

[1] United Nations. United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 2018.
[2] FAO & UNPFII (United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues). Joint brief: The right to food and indigenous peoples United Nations website2008 [cited 2023 January 20]. Available from: https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/Right_to_food.pdf
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[4] Lovell I. Freight and chronic disease in remote Indigenous communities: the story of an apple from tree to table. Paper presented at: National Rural Health Conference; March 7-10; Albury, NSW. [internet] 2014 [cited 2024 May]. Available from:
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[5] Pollard C, Savage, V., Landrigan, T., et al,. Food Access and Cost Survey 2013 Report. Perth, Western Australia: Government of Western Australia, Department of Health; 2015.
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to a healthy diet, and food security, being out of reach for many families[11]. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders are advising us that cost-of-living pressures, which are on the rise across Australia, are impacting remote North Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and having significant impacts on food security.

2.2 Health impacts

In 2018, the burden of disease was 2.1 times higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples than for other Queenslanders and noted to be the result of a complex interaction of factors, including demographic, socioeconomic, and environmental, as well as disparities in access to services and the prevalence of risky health behaviours[12]. Chronic diseases accounted for 70% of this health gap, with inadequate nutrition contributing to 15% of this[13].

The Double Burden of Malnutrition (DBM) is the coexistence of undernutrition and overnutrition (too much of low-quality, low-nutrition foods).[14] DBM has become a significant public health issue amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in rural and remote areas of Australia, significantly contributing to the development of the diet-related chronic diseases responsible for at least 75% of the morbidity and mortality gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians.[15] The risk of DBM is significantly increased in communities experiencing food insecurity.

Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in Northern Australia, type 2 diabetes rates are 20 times higher than in non-Indigenous youth, and 70-90% of children under two in remote areas experience anaemia, some of which can be attributed to poor nutrition[16,17]. Good nutrition can significantly reduce the risk of these conditions, for which food security is fundamental.

Food insecurity also has mental health and wellbeing impacts. It affects children's academic, social, and emotional development[18] and leads to stress and anxiety within families[19,20].

The impacts of food insecurity are pervasive and touch many life domains, including significant impacts on health. Hence, addressing food security is critical for achieving all Closing the Gap targets, particularly Target Outcome 1: Everyone enjoys a long and healthy life, Target Outcome 2: Children are Born healthy and strong, Target Outcome 4; Children thrive in their early years.

3 Food security Priorities

Relevance to Terms of Reference:
(b) the challenges and potential actions to improving energy, food, and water security
(d) relevant Closing the Gap targets.

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[11] Lee AJ, Patay D, Summons S, Lewis M, Herron L-M, Nona F, et al. Cost and affordability of healthy, equitable and more sustainable diets in the Torres Strait Islands. Aust N Z J Public Health. 2022;46(3):340–5

[12] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Australian Burden of Disease Study: Impact and Causes of Illness and Death in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People 2018. [internet] Canberra (AU) 2022 [cited 2024 May]. Available from: https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/burden-of-disease/illness-death-indigenous-2018/formats

[13] AIHW . Australian Burden of Disease Study: impact and causes of illness and death in Australia 2015. Canberra: AIHW; 2019. [Google Scholar]

[14] World Health Organization (WHO) [internet]. 2022 [cited 2024 Sep 19]. Available from: https://apps.who.int/nutrition/double-burden-malnutrition/en/index.html.

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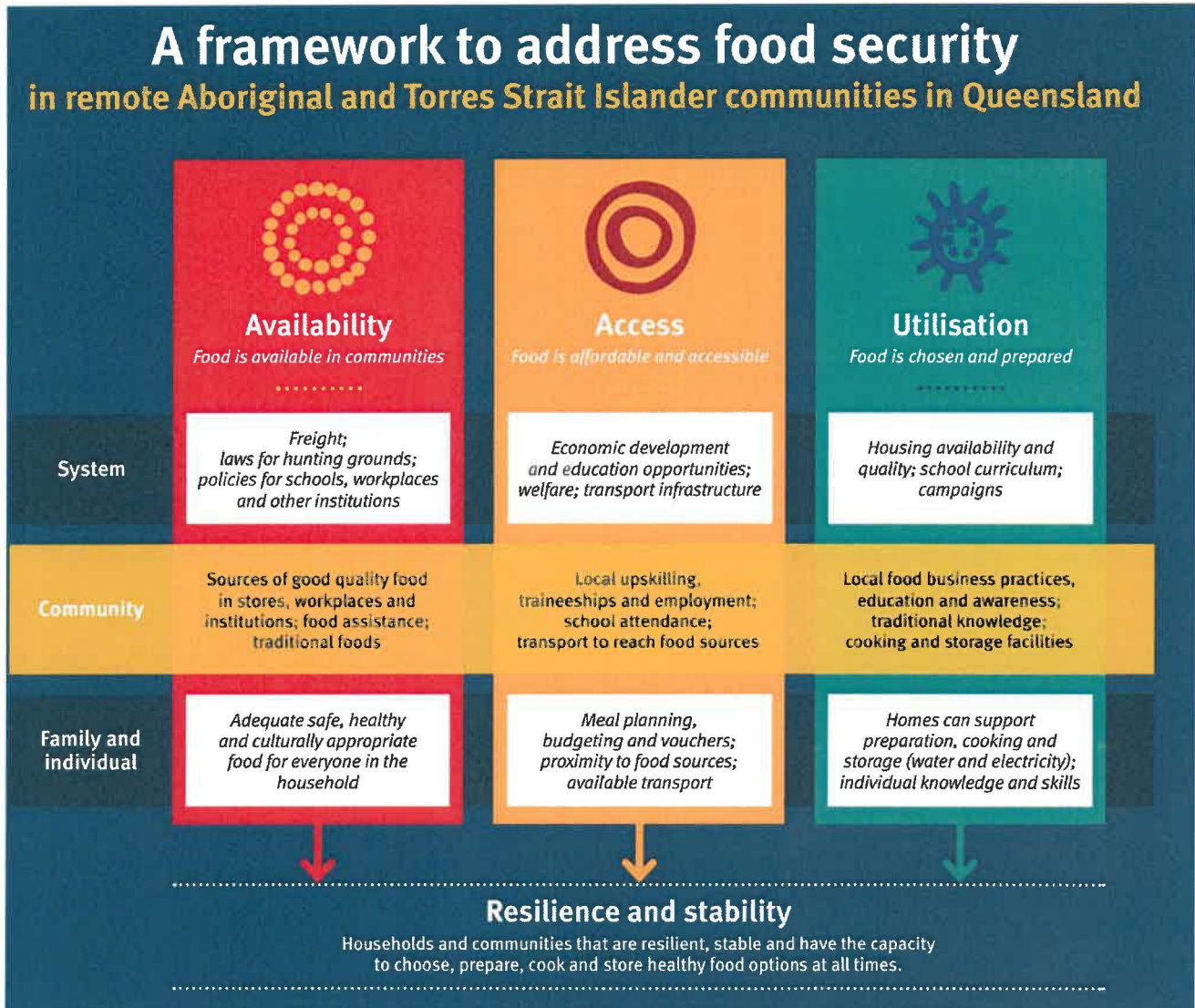
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[18] Leonard D et al,. Early childhood anaemia more than doubles the risk of developmental vulnerability at school-age among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children of remote Far North Queensland: Findings of a retrospective cohort study. Nutrition & Dietetics Journal of Dietitians Australia. 2020;77(3)

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[20] Ward P, Verity F, Carter P, Tsourtos G, Coveney J, Wong K. Food Stress in Adelaide: The relationship between low income and the affordability of healthy food. Journal of Environmental and Publish Health. 2013

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The factors contributing to food insecurity are complex, interconnected and span the system, as demonstrated in the framework below. Broadly, *Gather + Grow 2023-2032* considers the barriers and enablers to food security under the four priority areas (listed on page two above). These are interconnected and work together to holistically address food insecurity.

A framework to address food security
in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Queensland

	Availability *Food is available in communities*	**Access** *Food is affordable and accessible*	**Utilisation** *Food is chosen and prepared*
System	*Freight;* *laws for hunting grounds;* *policies for schools, workplaces* *and other institutions*	*Economic development* *and education opportunities;* *welfare; transport infrastructure*	*Housing availability and* *quality; school curriculum;* *campaigns*
Community	Sources of good quality food in stores, workplaces and institutions; food assistance; traditional foods	Local upskilling, traineeships and employment; school attendance; transport to reach food sources	Local food business practices, education and awareness; traditional knowledge; cooking and storage facilities
Family and individual	*Adequate safe, healthy* *and culturally appropriate* *food for everyone in the* *household*	*Meal planning,* *budgeting and vouchers;* *proximity to food sources;* *available transport*	*Homes can support* *preparation, cooking and* *storage (water and electricity);* *individual knowledge and skills*

Resilience and stability
Households and communities that are resilient, stable and have the capacity
to choose, prepare, cook and store healthy food options at all times.

Source: https://hw.qld.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/hwqld-gather-grow-qld-remote-food-security-framework.pdf

3.1 Logistics and Supply Chain

Food security requires a resilient and stable system that ensures consistent availability of healthy foods. The latest inquiries into food security and supermarket prices outline the challenges associated with supplying food, particularly perishable items, to remote locations, including Northern Australia[21]. Complex inequities in Queensland's food system create disparities, making food less affordable, accessible, and available in remote areas, particularly Northern Queensland[22]. Transporting food to these regions, particularly perishable, healthy items, is challenging due to high costs, weather disruptions, and fragile cold chains[23]. In some remote communities, freight costs alone can account for up to 20% of food prices[24].

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[21] Queensland Parliament. REPORT NO. 1, 57TH PARLIAMENT - INQUIRY INTO SUPERMARKET PRICING. 2024. Available from: Committee Details | Queensland Parliament
[22] ARUP. Remote Community Supply Chain Study. Health and Wellbeing Queensland, Queensland Government; 2023.
[23] ARUP. Remote Community Supply Chain Study. Health and Wellbeing Queensland, Queensland Government; 2023.
[24] Parliament of Australia. Australian Food Story: Feeding the Nation and Beyond. 2023

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In Northern Queensland, the food distribution network is complex, relying on a combination of private and public infrastructure and long-haul multi-modal transport[25,26]. The region is largely dependent on imports for essential groceries and its dispersed population exacerbates supply challenges, both of which impact on food security. Ultimately leading to higher prices, limited availability and poorer quality of food.

Addressing the logistics and supply chain challenges related to food supply in Northern Queensland are therefore essential to the region's food security. Through the *Gather + Grow Action Plan 2023-2026*, HWQld is actively collaborating with government departments and key organisations across the supply chain to enhance food access and availability in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. For example, HWQld have undertaken a remote food supply chain mapping study and established a Logistics and Supply Chain Technical Working Group. These efforts aim to strengthen the supply chain and ensure more reliable access to essential foods.

3.2 Local Food production

Access to fresh, healthy produce in many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities remains limited, leading to a higher consumption of processed foods that are high in sugar, fat, and salt[27,28]. During consultations for *Gather + Grow 2023-2032*, community members expressed strong interest in local food production to improve access to healthy produce and self-determine their own food systems[29].

While bush foods have been a focal point in other strategies, HWQld recommends expanding efforts to include home and market gardens, which could significantly increase access to fresh healthy food in these communities.

There are several challenges associated with local food production ventures, such as land and water ownership, workforce shortages, soil quality, technical knowledge, infrastructure, planning and business acumen[30,31]. HWQld advocates for securing technical expertise, infrastructure, and proper training for local people to support sustainable, place-based production and local economies. This aligns with findings from the last inquiry into food security[32]. It also supports Closing the Gap target and outcome 8, *Strong economic participation and development of people and their communities.*

Community-driven gardens may offer a solution with potential economic benefits, however they must be part of a broader, multi-faceted strategy to address food security. Crucially, these initiatives need to be led by local communities to ensure cultural relevance and be evaluated for effectiveness. HWQld is actively partnering with communities in FNQ to support garden initiatives, reinforcing the broader food security agenda. These actions are being driven through commitments by HWQld and other Queensland Government departments under the *Gather + Grow Action Plan 2023-2026.*

3.3 Healthy Communities

Despite evidence suggesting that healthy diets can be more affordable than current dietary patterns in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, many residents' diets still diverge significantly from the Australian Guidelines for Healthy Eating[33]. The preference for takeaway and convenience foods, which are often less nutritious, stems from several factors: lack of essential kitchen equipment (such as refrigerators and storage facilities), large family sizes and food-sharing practices, social norms, limited availability of high-quality healthy

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25 Queensland Parliament. REPORT NO. 1, 57TH PARLIAMENT - INQUIRY INTO SUPERMARKET PRICING. 2024. Available from: Committee Details | Queensland Parliament

26 ARUP. Remote Community Supply Chain Study. Health and Wellbeing Queensland, Queensland Government; 2023.

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28 Lindberg R, McNaughton SA, Abbott G, Pollard CM, Yaroch AL, Livingstone KM. The diet quality of food-insecure Australian adults—a nationally representative cross-sectional analysis. Nutrients. 2022;14(19):4133. doi: 10.3390/ nu14194133

29 Health and Wellbeing Queensland. Gather + Grow 2023-2032 Queensland Remote Food Security Strategy. Available from: Gather + Grow Strategy 2023-2032 (hw.qld.gov.au)

30 Hunter E., Onnis L., Printchard J. Gardens of discontent: health and horticulture in remote Aboriginal Australia. Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. 2014;34:1-38.

31 Green R. From Little Things, Big Things Grow. Investigating Remote Aboriginal Community Gardens: The University of Sydney; 2009.

32 House of Representatives – Standing Committee on Agriculture. Australian Food Story: Feeding the Nation and Beyond – Inquiry into food security in Australia. 2023

33 Lee A, Patay D, Herron L, Harrison E, Lewis M. Affordability of current, and healthy, more equitable, sustainable diets by area of socioeconomic disadvantage and remoteness in Queensland: insights into food choice. International Journal of Equity in Health. 2021;20

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foods, perceived high costs, and insufficient meal planning and budgeting skills[34]. While affordability is a key factor in food security, it is not the only influence on dietary choices and effective solutions require a multi-strategic and context-specific approach.

Healthy environments and food security are deeply interconnected. A healthy environment supports nutritious choices through utilisation of the four P's of marketing (pricing, placement, promotion and products); for example, placing water at eye-level, in the fridge and soft-drinks on the shelves at room-temperature. Provision of healthy environments and working towards Closing the Gap through improving easy access to nutritious foods will help shift the norm towards healthy dietary habits in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and assist in reducing the burden of disease experienced by these communities. While formal education is important, broader community health promotion, and the healthiness of community environments, also play a significant role.

The *Gather + Grow Action Plan 2023-2026* addresses these challenges by partnering with communities, government, industry, universities, and schools to implement evidence-based, community-informed actions. Key initiatives include:
- Working with communities to develop tailored Community Action Plans to create a healthy environment.
- Assessing current food systems to identify opportunities for improvement.
- Enhancing remote stores to provide healthier food options.
- Implementing culturally relevant health-promoting initiatives across all life stages to educate community members about food systems and nutrition.

Tailored health promotion programs are essential for improving community knowledge and food security. These initiatives support food security and align with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, ensuring that actions respect and address the priority areas outlined in the agreement.

3.4 Healthy Homes

In remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, inadequate housing can significantly impact food security by limiting access to proper cooking and food storage facilities, leading to issues such as poor hygiene and increased risk of several illnesses[35,36,37,38]. Reliable water and power supply further threaten healthy home practices such as cooking[39,40]. Due to these challenges, among others, many families rely on processed, nutrient-poor, readymade foods that require little to no preparation and have a long shelf life[41].

The National Agreement of Closing the Gap identifies healthy living environments and housing as priority areas, in reducing the many health risks associated with homelessness, poor quality housing, overcrowding, and non-functional health hardware such as fridges, cooktops, running water and electricity.

HWQld is working to address health-related housing challenges by working closely with relevant partners to increase access to health hardware (for example, cooking utensils, food storage solutions, and preparation equipment). Through the *Gather + Grow Action Plan 2023-2026.*, HWQld and its partners aim to enhance the capacity of households and communities to manage food safely and effectively and achieve food security.

[34] Lee A, Patay D, Herron L, Harrison E, Lewis M. Affordability of current, and healthy, more equitable, sustainable diets by area of socioeconomic disadvantage and remoteness in Queensland: insights into food choice. International Journal of Equity in Health. 2021;20

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4 Food Security Strategies and Policies

(e) the extent and efficacy of policy, legislative, regulatory and funding frameworks, including the overlap or any gaps between federal, state and territory frameworks.

HWQld recognises that a one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate given Australia's diverse communities, particularly in Northern regions. Coordinated and multi-strategy approaches to address food insecurity across Northern Australia and, in particular in Queensland's Northern communities are required. Effective interventions must consider the long-term health impacts of food insecurity and aim to improve overall wellbeing by addressing both immediate needs and underlying causes of food insecurity through the creation of cohesive strategies and policies.

5 Recommendations

HWQld recommends the following actions to enhance food security and focus on health outcomes:

- **Empower local communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples** in the co-design, implementation, and evaluation of policies, aligning with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. This involves integrating community insights and existing research to develop strategies that are both effective, flexible, and sustainable.
- **Enhance policy coherence** across all tiers of government, focusing on the health outcomes of food insecurity. For example, ensure alignment with the national remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Food Security Strategy currently under development by the National Indigenous Australians Agency. To achieve meaningful improvements, collaboration across government agencies is crucial. An example of this is the Gather + Grow Steering Committee which was established to share leadership and accountability of food security across remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in North Queensland and includes representatives from all levels of government. Policy coherence is key to ensuring that food security measures are aligned and that efforts are not duplicated.
- **Incorporate food security considerations** into climate change strategies to address both immediate and long-term impacts.
- **Improve food affordability** through measures to increase income and reduce the cost of healthy food, especially in North Queensland remote and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- **Implement and report on recommendations** from recent food security inquiries to ensure actionable outcomes.
- **Enhance monitoring and surveillance** of food security and its determinants to improve evidence and data about access to culturally appropriate and healthy foods.

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