

Food Alliance for Remote Australia: a voice for food security issues in remote Australia

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HUMAN RIGHTS

On the 10th December 1948, more than 50 years ago, the General Assembly of the UN adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In it Article 25 states that:

*“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food....”*¹

Access to a healthy food supply was deemed a fundamental human right, something we all have a right to expect will be made available to us by the mechanisms of the society in which we live.

Dietary Guidelines for Adults in Australia, 2003 advise us to:

- “Enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods*
- *Eat plenty of vegetables, legumes and fruits”*².

The promise is that if we eat a wide variety of nutritious foods including plenty of vegetables, legumes and fruits, most of us will live a long and healthy life, and be free of nutrition related diseases.

A secure, nutritious food supply is deemed both a human right, and necessary for our health.

In many remote parts of Australia, whole communities of Aboriginal people live in an environment of food insecurity.

Food security is access at all times to the food needed for a healthy life, regardless of financial status. Food **insecurity** exists when a person cannot obtain a nourishing, culturally acceptable diet³. Community food security concerns the underlying social, economic, and institutional factors within a community that affect the quantity and quality of available food and its affordability⁴.

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES DEFINED

In the Aboriginal context, in Australia there are

- 1,223 discrete communities with about 110,000 people (30% of the total estimated Aboriginal population)
- 73% of the communities have less than 50 people;
- 12% communities have 200 people or more, and
- 35% unemployment rate,
- 29% of people worry about going without food.
- Life expectancy is 16-20 years less than non-Aboriginal people⁵.

THE FOOD SUPPLY

The community stores are a key source of nutrition for many of the 1,223 discrete Aboriginal communities. Just as the providers of power and water are considered essential services, as providers of the primary source of nutrition for the community, stores too should be viewed as essential services ⁶.

Cost

The cost of fresh food in remote communities is much, much higher than the cost in southern cities, averaging between 150-180% of capital city prices. Market basket surveys of weekly family grocery costs have found that costs are:

- between 25% and 50% higher for Indigenous communities in Cape York (Queensland) than in suburban Brisbane;
- around 40% higher in the Torres Strait than in Cairns;
- between 20% and 80% higher for Indigenous communities in the Pilbara and Kimberley regions of Western Australia than in Perth; and
- more than 60% higher in Indigenous community stores in the Northern Territory than in Australian capital cities ⁷.

Availability

Many isolated community stores carry very limited stocks of fresh foods because of freight costs, infrequent deliveries, lack of cool storage and display infrastructure, or lack of store management and governance expertise ⁷.

Poverty

Compounding this situation is poverty. The income of Indigenous people generally declines with increasing geographic remoteness ⁸, and so people who are amongst the poorest in Australia have the highest food costs. Research in central Australia in 1998 established that Aboriginal people living on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands do not have sufficient income to cover the cost of a nutritious diet and basic hygiene needs ⁹. And the situation is not likely to be better in other remote parts of Australia.

Consistent food insecurity results in poor nutritional health, which has the potential for profound long-term effects on a person's health, lifestyle, activity level, ability to find work, well-being, and lifespan ¹⁰.

It needs to be acknowledged that food insecurity is not the only problem facing Aboriginal people in remote areas. The causes of the high rates indigenous ill health are complex and interrelated and poor nutrition related to food insecurity is just one but central to the problem, and needs to be tackled on many levels ⁷.

In a report released in 1997, the Australian Medical Association made the following statement, "The overwhelming feeling amongst health professionals is that poor nutrition is the main factor contributing to the majority of diseases in remote aboriginal communities" ¹¹. Seven years on and there has been little change to the food supply in remote areas.

Northern Territory Aboriginal children aged one to five years admitted to hospitals between 1993 and 1997 were *120 times* more likely to be diagnosed as undernourished than non-Aboriginal children of the same age ¹². In late 2002, the Royal Darwin

Hospital released figures that showed a 25% increase in the number of children diagnosed with malnutrition and diarrhoea over the previous three years ¹³.

Maternal malnutrition, low birth weight, and poor nutrition in infancy and childhood are all implicated as possible causal factors in the development of chronic, life-threatening illness in later life ¹⁴. Diseases such as heart disease, kidney disease and diabetes are linked, and many Indigenous people in remote regions suffer from two or more of these serious illnesses as ‘co-morbidities’ ⁷.

We need to ask ourselves, to whose advantage is it that this situation remains unchanged and unchallenged? Tax payers? Aboriginal people? The health system? Australians in general?

SOME IMPORTANT STRATEGIES

Healthy Food Basket (or Market Basket) Surveys are objective measures of the availability and affordability of healthy food, two fundamental aspects of food security. While it is important that they continue, conducting the surveys does not bring about improvements in the food supply. The Kimberley Market Basket Surveys have been conducted in Western Australia since 1987 yet the situation remained unchanged a decade on ¹⁵.

The proportion of income required to purchase a basket of healthy foods in Northern Territory remote community stores has remained unchanged since 1998. The average number of fresh fruits and vegetables available in remote NT stores has also remained unchanged since 1998 ¹⁶.

There have been several coordinated attempts to improve food security in remote Aboriginal communities, and I will now discuss some important ones.

Arnhem Lands Progress Association (ALPA).

ALPA is owned by five Arnhemland Aboriginal communities and has been in operation now for 31 years. ALPA owns five stores and manages six others on a "fee for service basis". The foods sold in the ALPA stores is governed by the ALPA Nutrition Policy. ALPA also offers and conducts training in Certificate 1 and 2 in "Retail". The Board of Management is made up of Aboriginal people, allowing for strong Aboriginal control ¹⁷.

Mai Wiru: Regional Stores Policy and associated regulations for the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands

The Mai Wiru regional stores policy is based on the belief that residents of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands are entitled to safe, affordable and nutritious food. The APY Lands Council has asked for prices to be reduced to the equivalent of Adelaide prices, and have identified the need for a regional stores policy. The laws governing the AP lands is being changed to give the AP Lands Council the power to pass a by-law that all stores on the AP lands are bound to abide by the Mai Wiru store policy ⁹.

Jawoyn – Fred Hollows Foundation Nutrition Program

In 1999, the Jawoyn Association (via Katherine NT) asked The Fred Hollows Foundation to help develop a nutrition strategy to tackle the major underlying cause of poor health in their communities. The *Nyirranggulung* ('all together as one mob')

Nutrition Project combines interrelated programs that empower local people to gain long-term improvements in nutrition, in particular by increasing the availability of affordable, nutritious food in Jawoyn communities. Their underlying philosophy is to empower by building on existing initiatives, work in genuine partnership, and build the capacity of local people. Partnering with other philanthropic and corporate foundations has gathered funding, expertise and broad-based support for their programs ⁷.

Recently, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Senator Amanda Vandstone, announced a grant of \$1.5M to support the expansion of the Fred Hollows model ¹⁸.

Market Basket Surveys (MBS)

As stated previously, Market Basket Surveys are conducted extensively throughout the Northern Territory annually as part of the implementation of the NT Food and Nutrition Action Plan ¹⁶. The NT MBS is the best national example of monitoring changes (or lack thereof) to the food supply in remote communities.

FoodNorth

The FoodNorth project was a preliminary study in 2003 in preparation for a planned longer-term project to address food supply issues in north Australia. Supported by the health ministers of Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia, the aim of the Food North project was to compile information about the critical issues impacting on cost and availability of healthy food and to identify strategies and initiatives that had been used to improve food supply in remote locations ¹⁹. FoodNorth is driven by NANG, the North Australian Nutrition Group.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan, 2000–2010 (NATSINSAP)

NATSINSAP was developed as part of Eat Well Australia ²⁰. Its aim was to provide a framework for action to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing through better nutrition. The strategy and action plan was developed by an Indigenous working party in consultation with Indigenous health organisations and state and territory agencies ²¹. NATSINSAP highlights seven key areas for action. Since the launch of NATSINSAP, only \$100,000 of funding has been allocated for implementation.

Store Charter

Developed by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), the purpose of Store Charter is to help stores to comply with relevant laws, encourage higher trading standards, and help to further develop understanding and respect between store owners, operators and staff and indigenous people ²². To date, the voluntary uptake of Store Charter has yet to be evaluated.

GAPS

Small retail outlets selling perishable food products in small or isolated communities face many challenges, including transport difficulties, and high overheads associated with maintaining buildings, equipment and stock in remote locations. Most of the factors that contribute to high costs and limited supply in these locations lie outside the health sector, and require commitment and partnerships from a range of sectors to address the problems ⁷. It has been shown, however, that none of these problems are insurmountable. Individual store managers, ALPA, and The Fred Hollows Foundation

have all demonstrated that these issues can be overcome. However, given that there are 1,223 discrete Aboriginal communities Australia-wide, change that is both sustainable in the long term and widespread is what is required. Without a high level of long term intervention, these issues are particularly resistant to LONG TERM change.

THE BIRTH OF FARA

It was with concern about the above issues that a three-day Food Policy Action Workshop was organised and conducted in Alice Springs in October 2003.

Around thirty participants attended the three-day workshop, including nutritionists, dietitians, nutrition workers, Aboriginal Health Workers, Environmental Health Officers, and other concerned health professionals, citizens and taxpayers all of whom had an interest in food security in remote areas. Over the three days of the workshop, many of the issues above and others were discussed and debated in great detail⁶. At the conclusion of the workshop the participants felt that the best step forward was to form an independent advocacy alliance, the intentions of which are clarified in the following resolution:

"This workshop resolves that the health and well-being of Indigenous Australians, especially those living in remote areas, can only be improved when healthy food is readily available, affordable and safe.

*"The participants in the workshop have formed an alliance called **Food Alliance for Remote Australia (FARA)** to progress these issues, and calls for collective action to:*

- *increase the range of affordable healthy foods available in remote community settings*
- *rigorous enforcement of current regulations governing retail operations*
- *training and support for better retail operations, and*
- *greater community control of the local food supply⁶"*

NUTRITION ACTIVISM

Given that much of the research, policy making and activity are government driven, there is an opportunity and need for an independent body, such as the Food Alliance for Remote Australia, to take on an advocacy role in the push for improved food security in remote areas of Australia. Nutrition activism recognises access to adequate food, health and care as human rights embedded in international human rights law. Rights based approaches offer new opportunities for strengthening monitoring, advocacy and accountability on promoting food and nutrition security, calling for academic and non-academic activism alike. Workers allotment of time to certain activities may be perceived by peers as lying outside legitimised activities but may actually prove critical in driving some of the very processes on which empirical and policy research would in turn be based²³.

Not everyone is a nutritionist, but anyone can be a nutrition activist. FARA provides a platform for non-nutrition professionals and other citizens with an interest in food security to have their voice heard. Tools for objectively measuring and monitoring the food supply in remote areas are available on line enabling individuals or groups to have a wider variety of participation in measuring and monitoring food security in remote areas.

Curriculum to skill secondary and tertiary level Aboriginal students to actively assess and monitor their own food supply in remote areas is in the planning stages. By becoming a member of the discussion group you may find support and advice from experts in their field. Increasing membership and involvement of non-Aboriginal service providers living in remote communities will enable the development of a detailed view of the food supply in remote areas. By combining and coordinating our efforts the Food Alliance for Remote Australia can become a force with influence to better drive the collaborative effort required to develop food security in remote areas. With your support FARA can be a voice for food security issues in remote Australia.

<http://www.FARA.bite.to>

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