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NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER WOMEN'S ALLIANCE

June 2020

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Women's Alliance (NATSIWA) thank you for the opportunity to provide to you our submission.

Project Team:

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Introduction

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA) is the peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Australia. The leadership team of Directors are Indigenous women each representing States and Territory across Australia. NATSIWA is funded by the Australian Government to bring together the issues and voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's organisations and individuals across Australia.

Summary

Evidence suggests that food security among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has not yet been achieved. There is an unacceptable food-related health gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-indigenous Australians, revealing an urgent need to improve food security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples throughout the country.¹

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience much higher rates of food insecurity than non-Aboriginal people with those living in remote areas more likely to experience food insecurity than those in non-remote areas.

There are numerous underlying causes of food insecurity in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities these include socioeconomic factors such as housing, overcrowding, transport, food costs, cultural food values, education, and nutrition literacy, higher food prices, particularly in remote areas, as well as freight charges, store management practices, and reduced retail competition and geographical isolation.² The combination of higher levels of unemployment, lower levels of income, and higher food prices means that the percentage of income spent on food increases, contributing to the health and wellbeing impacts and extreme higher rates of illness and disease that this population experiences compared to non-indigenous Australians and is directly related to food insecurity.³

Food security is a fundamental human right and is recognised in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, enshrined in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.⁴ The human rights-based approach to food security underscores “universal, interdependent, indivisible and interrelated human rights.” Such an approach emphasizes the achievement of food security as an outcome of the realisation of existing rights. It includes the principles of individual agency, public participation in decision making and public affairs, the right to freedom of expression, and the right to seek and receive information, including in relation to decision making about policies on realizing the right to adequate food. The guidelines also point out that a human rights-based approach to achieving food security “should take into account the need for emphasis on poor and vulnerable people who are often excluded from the processes that determine policies to promote food security and the need for inclusive societies free from discrimination by the State in meeting their obligations to promote and respect human rights.

Past and current Australian government policies that have disregarded a human rights-based approach to achieving food security and have limited peoples’ participation in relevant decision-making processes. Food security policies fail to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ agency and perspectives; as a result, decisions are made for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples rather than with them.

The cost of food is reported to be a 26% higher price of a "basket of food" in remote community stores in comparison to major cities.⁵ The higher price is attributed to costs associated with operating stores in geographically isolated locations, including freight costs and repairing store infrastructure as well as the lack of locally sourced perishable produce.

The many remote towns or communities only have one store, means there is an absence of competition and stores are able to sell goods at high prices or provide inferior produce or products without a reduction in demand. There are few transport options for people wanting to access larger shopping centres. These remote towns and communities are the most disadvantaged and the additional costs of groceries further compounds their disadvantage.⁶

Convenience foods, which are energy dense and lacking in nutrition, are often the most readily available source of food for many people. It thus follows that while awareness-raising campaigns on choosing healthy foods to eat, food preparation and cooking, and budgeting for food purchase play an important role in improving food security among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the effectiveness of such initiatives is dependent on healthy food actually being available and accessible in the first place.

The World Health Organization’s declaration on food security highlights the three pillars that food security is built on: food access, meaning sufficient financial and other resources for people to obtain appropriate food for a nutritious diet; food availability, meaning sufficient quantities of

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nutritious food available on a consistent basis; and food use, meaning the appropriate use of food, based on knowledge of basic nutrition and care

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance makes the following recommendations to the inquiry, to address food supply and demand issues in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in relation to food security.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommendation 1: That Government provide appropriate resources to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations to support enhanced nutritional literacy, so as consumers, they can assert control over improved food choices; and food security solutions.

Recommendation 2: That Government address the interrelatedness of multiple factors, including health, housing, transportation, education, employment, and training, as well as food. Security.

Recommendation 3: That Government support Aboriginal, locally based solutions, where communities have identified needs and designed local responses, such as community stores, market gardens, bush food initiatives and food banks.

Recommendation 4: That Improved consumer protections and supports be established and government led investigation into price gouging.

Thanking you.

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