TRANSFORMING AUSTRALIAN FOOD SYSTEMS: SHAPING A MORE EQUITABLE, HEALTH AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURE FOR AUSTRALIAN FOOD

WOMEN'S HEALTH GOULBURN NORTH EAST SUBMISSION
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Acknowledgements

Women's Health Goulburn North East acknowledges the wisdom, living culture and connection of the Traditional Custodians of the unceded lands on which we work, and acknowledge the profound disruption of colonisation and the Stolen Generations on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We also respect the self-determination of First Nations people.

We are intersectional in our approach and are proud to stand beside generations of great women whose work has brought us closer to equality for all. We believe in shared and just cultural transformation that embraces diversity, and these acknowledgements are part of the ethical principles that guide our work and conduct.

About Women's Health Goulburn North East

Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) is a proudly feminist organisation supporting the creation of regional and rural Victorian communities that centre intersectional equity, care, wellbeing, and safety. We view the world through a prevention lens and work according to a social determinants framework to address the root causes of gender inequality and gendered discrimination, exclusion, oppression, and violence. We believe in shared and just cultural transformation and locate our work within an ecosystem of broad global alliances working across social movements.

Our vision is that "Rural and regional women of all ages have optimal health and wellbeing." This discussion paper is intricately connected to our vision, as healthy eating and food security have such substantial impacts upon individual and community health and are so dependent upon an individual's and community's ability and capacity to access the resources, systems, policy planning processes and networks required to secure sustainably produced, easy-to-access, affordable and nutritious food.

We are pleased to have the opportunity to consider this discussion paper in the context of this vision and our past work, and to bring our perspective and experience as a regional gender equity organisation to discussions around the social determinants of healthy eating. As such, our submission will concentrate solely on focus area 1: Enabling equitable access to healthy diets.

Introduction

Food insecurity is a growing problem in Australia, with more than half a million Australian households struggling to feed themselves on any given day, and more than two million households experiencing food insecurity in 2021-22.[1] Food security refers to a person's "physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."[2] The barriers to this in Australia are numerous and include complex intersections between economic factors (income, cost of living, unemployment, rising food prices), social and cultural factors (access to culturally specific and special dietary food, stigma and discrimination associated with accessing adequate food) and political factors (punitive and coercive social support mechanisms, for instance). Communities across Australia saw this complex interplay of factors play out during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the end of temporary, pandemic-related increases to social support payments plunging many individuals and families back below absolute and relative poverty lines,[3] and global, national, and local supply chain disruptions impacting access to and availability of some fresh foods in our communities.

While we note the "Imperative for change" section of the discussion paper makes mention of "inequity in food access and nutrition-related public health issues," we believe it critical that this section of the paper emphasises food insecurity and the way the social determinants of health and intersectionality impact one's equitable access to the basic human right of sustainable and nutritious food.

Equitable access to sustainable and nutritious food must be the top priority of the Australian Food Systems Roadmap, and this can only be achieved by addressing the social determinants of diet-related health inequities. It is critical this is explored in detail throughout the Roadmap.

Access to and adoption of sustainable and nutritionally dense diets is shaped by a complex mingling of societal and individual factors that "operate both directly through the food system...and indirectly through political, economic social and cultural pathways."[4] That is, people's dietary behaviours are influenced by the conditions in which they are born, live, work and age; conditions which are, in turn, shaped by social structures, power dynamics and relationships, and cultural norms and values, such as gender inequality, sexism, racism, ableism, colonialism. These social structures, power structures and norms pervade individuals' experiences of daily life and the factors that shape their access to and participation in decision- and policymaking; access to resources and dominant cultural narratives around

[1] Foodbank, 2022. Foodbank Hunger Report, https://www.foodbank.org.au/foodbank-hunger-report-2022/?state=vic [Access 14.2.2023]

[2] World Bank, 2023. What is Food Security?, https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/agriculture/brief/food-security-update/what-is-food-security [Accessed 14.2.23]

[3] Zorbas, C., Browne, J., Chung, A. *et al.,* 2023 Shifting the social determinants of food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic: the Australian experience. *Food Sec.* **15**, 151–170 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1007/s12571-022-01318-4 [Accessed 15.2.23]

[4] Friel, S., L. Hattersley, L. Ford, 2015. Evidence review: Addressing the social determinants of inequities in healthy eating, The National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, The Australian National University, pages 5,6. [Accessed 8.2.23]

what a healthy diet is, who might access it and how; and the degree to which individuals have agency in this national conversation, for instance.

Australian research demonstrates that "people with less money, less education, insecure working conditions and poor living conditions are more likely to experience food insecurity and have higher levels of diet-related diseases."[5] Indeed, in 2022 Foodbank reported that certain demographic cohorts were disproportionately impacted by food insecurity, with 52% of households with dependent children aged under 18 experiencing food insecurity, including 65% of single-parent and 49% of two-parent families.[6] Demographic data from 2022 which shows that 79% of single-parent households in Australia are headed by women, implies that this experience of food insecurity is highly gendered.[7] The gendered nature of food insecurity was explored in depth in Foodbank's 2019 report, demonstrating its complex intersections with family and domestic violence, with women experiencing food insecurity more likely than men to have experienced gender-based violence in their lifetimes (53% per cent compared to 32%).[8]

These gendered experiences of food insecurity are compounded by other factors:

- **Living situation:** 69% of households that rent or live in social/mobile housing or are between homes experience food insecurity;[9]
- **Employment status:** 52% of households with a person who is unemployed/looking for work experience food insecurity;[10]
- **Disability and/or carer status:** 57% of people on a disability support pension or carer payment experience food insecurity;[11]
- **Economic security:** 43% of households with a combined gross annual income of below $30,000 experience food insecurity, compared with 28% of higher-income households on combined gross incomes of $130,000 or above.[12]
- **Indigeneity and racism:** Indigenous people experience grossly inflated rates of food insecurity, with one in five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in non-remote environments

[5] Friel, S., L. Hattersley, L. Ford, 2015. Evidence review: Addressing the social determinants of inequities in healthy eating, The National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, The Australian National University, pages 5,6. [Accessed 8.2.23]

[6] Foodbank, 2022, Foodbank Hunger Report. https://reports.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Foodbank-Hunger-Report-2022-1.pdf, page 9. [Accessed 14.2.23]

[7] Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022. Labour force status of families. https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-status-families/latest-release [Accessed 14.2.2023]

[8] Foodbank, 2019. Foodbank Hunger Report. https://www.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Foodbank-Hunger-Report-2019.pdf?state=au [Accessed 14.2.23]

[9] Foodbank, 2022, Foodbank Hunger Report. https://reports.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Foodbank-Hunger-Report-2022-1.pdf, page 9. [Accessed 14.2.23]

[10] Ibid

[11] Ibid

[12] Ibid

(which accounts for about three quarters of the total Indigenous population in Australia) reporting being food insecure in a national 2012-13 survey, compared to one in 25 in the wider Australian population.[13]

- **Geography:** research shows that remote, rural, and regional communities experience their own particular challenges to food security. Even with access to regular supply chains (often across vast distances between producers, manufacturing/packaging facilities, warehousing facilities, point of sale and consumers), remote, rural, and regional communities can be left with minimal food choices and expensive fresh/perishable food. This is of particularly concern for remotely located Indigenous communities, with 77% of young First Nations families living in regional and remote communities experiencing food insecurity in 2021.[14]

Food insecurity has its own negative impacts upon the mental and physical health and individuals and communities. As an organisation that is principally concerned with the health and wellbeing of women, we are particularly disturbed by the way food insecurity exacerbates the already-disproportionate rates of mental and physical ill-health experienced by women, with women experiencing food insecurity reporting higher levels of anxiety, stress, physical ill-health (lack of energy and difficulty concentrating) and feelings of guilt, shame, and stigma than men experiencing food insecurity.[15]

While this data is not exhaustive it demonstrates the importance of government and communities urgently and decisively addressing these social determinants of food insecurity and dislodging harmful social narratives of human value and "dependency" to ensure every person in every community has equitable access to nutritious food.

This is best achieved by involving those with lived experience of food insecurity in every element of the design, planning, consultation, and execution of the Roadmap. We note that the paper states it is informed by "national consultation with industry, government, the civil sector, and research stakeholders from across the food system and its interacting systems, including CSIRO's research expertise." While we value the expertise of those who specialise in this field, we believe the vision, opportunities and suggested recommendations may fall short because of the absence from this paper of the lived experience of those for whom inequitable access to healthy food is a daily reality. Equitable policy depends upon policymakers "listening to all the voices in our community, particularly those from underrepresented groups who are often unheard and have in the past been labelled as 'hard to

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[13] Sherriff, S., Kalucy, D., Tong, A. *et al. Murradambirra Dhangaang* (make food secure): Aboriginal community and stakeholder perspectives on food insecurity in urban and regional Australia. *BMC Public Health* **22**, 1066 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-13202-z [Accessed 15.2.23]

[14] Foodbank, 2021. Foodbank Hunger Report. https://reports.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/documents/2021-Foodbank-Hunger-Report-PDF.pdf [Accessed 17.2.23]

[15] Foodbank, 2019. Foodbank Hunger Report. https://www.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Foodbank-Hunger-Report-2019.pdf?state=au [Accessed 15.2.23]

reach'."[16] If we are unable to listen to people who are often situated at the "systemic margins," policy, action, collaborations and trust between government, industry and community will always fall short.

As such, our priority recommendations in the submission focus exclusively on ensuring that the systemic conditions that create, drive, influence and shape people's and communities' experiences of food insecurity – that is, the social determinants of healthy eating - are centred, and that this work is done with the voices, lived experiences, needs and interests of people experiencing food insecurity front and centre.

Focus area 1: Enabling equitable access to healthy diets

1. How can industry, government and communities work together to increase the adoption of more sustainable and nutritious diets?

Address the social determinants of inequities in healthy eating
The data above highlights not only the policy change necessary to build food systems that are equitable, but also the vital cultural work that must be done to dislodge harmful social narratives of human value and "dependency" to ensure every person in every community has equitable access to nutritious food.

We contend that government, communities, and industry might work together to achieve this through:

- **Cultural reframing of the problem and the myriad of potential solutions –** Government, community, and industry all have a role to play in shifting the framing of food insecurity away from narratives about "individual responsibility" and recognising and addressing the structural barriers to the adoption of sustainable, healthy diets;
- **Challenging the rhetoric around social welfare "dependency"**[17], its connections to food insecurity, and the influence this rhetoric has on Australian policy and cultural values, to ensure all people are supported to access the support and care they need, when, where, how and for as long as they need it, without discrimination. This must be realised by centring the lived experience of those who have experienced food insecurity in all policy, project work and activities aimed at promoting and supporting the adoption of nutritious diets.
- **Challenging the social and cultural stigma around the use of food relief agencies –** research into food insecurity in Victoria during the pandemic highlighted that food relief agencies enabled members of the community to obtain fresh food that would have otherwise been

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[16] Centre for Public Impact, 2020. Learning to Listen Again: How people experiencing complex challenges feel about engagement and participation through the Covid-19 pandemic. https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/assets/documents/learning-to-listen-again.pdf, page 7. [Accessed 14.2.23]
[17] Arthur, D., 2021. Welfare dependency: the history of an idea. https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp2122/WelfareDependency [Accessed 14.2.23]

unaffordable or inaccessible, while reducing waste within the food system.[18] However, those visiting food charities were reluctant to do so because they felt guilt, shame and a sense of being "unworthy" of support.[19] Governments and community must work together to combat this stigma, to build awareness of the important roles of food relief agencies, and to commit greater financial support and resourcing of these organisations.

- **Greater resourcing of food relief agencies to enable them to adequately meet community demand, particularly for special dietary requirements or culturally specific food –** Foodbank data from 2021 indicated that 13% of food insecure Australians do not seek food relief because "they have already access all they are allowed to from a charity,"[20] implying that food relief demand is outstripping supply. People accessing food relief have also indicated that items provided by food relief organisations do not necessarily meet their needs, with 43% of people surveyed stating they desired greater access to foods for special dietary requirements and 29% of people desiring access to culturally specific food.[21]

- **Empowerment, support, resourcing of and genuinely listening to[22] communities and individuals – particularly those who have experienced food insecurity – as they directly participate** in the formulation of the Australian Food Systems Roadmap and other food security planning, decision-making and projects.

- **Taking advantage of all opportunities to support the integration of localised food production opportunities** in the Australian social sector – including schools and hospitals – and to mandate the inclusion of communal food growing areas in new residential developments.

- **Supporting and resourcing place-based initiatives**, led by local councils or existing food projects, that aim to achieve inclusive access to sustainable, healthy, and affordable food for people experiencing food insecurity.

- **Providing opportunities for a diverse range of people to participate in growing, cooking, and sharing food** within their local communities via the support and empowerment of community gardens and community kitchens, access to land, and measures to allow people time in their lives to engage in these life-sustaining activities.

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[18] Zorbas, C., Browne, J., Chung, A. *et al.,* 2023. Shifting the social determinants of food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic: the Australian experience. *Food Sec.* **15**, 151–170 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1007/s12571-022-01318-4 [Accessed 8.2.23]

[19] Ibid

[20] Foodbank, 2021. Foodbank Hunger Report. https://reports.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/documents/2021-Foodbank-Hunger-Report-PDF.pdf [Accessed 8.2.23]

[21] Ibid

[22] Centre for Public Impact, 2020. Learning to Listen Again: How people experiencing complex challenges feel about engagement and participation through the Covid-19 pandemic. https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/assets/documents/learning-to-listen-again.pdf. [Accessed 14.2.23]

2. What legislative and policy opportunities can ensure equitable access to healthy diets?

Compassionate social protection policies

WHGNE contends that equitable access to healthy diets for all people necessitates radical and holistic socio-structural change, and that when it comes to policy, the Roadmap must accept the challenge of calling for government commitments to a raft of policies across portfolios and budgetary decisions that centre social justice, wellbeing, connection, and intersectional equity to, finally, eliminate food insecurity in Australia.

With food insecurity and inequity connected to income levels, government should begin by addressing the inadequate unemployment benefits in Australia. Increasing these support payments would "significantly improve the equity of income distribution, as at present, [JobSeeker] recipients are among the lowest income earners in the country".[23] Indeed, research into experiences of government-led actions on the social determinants of food insecurity during Australia's COVID-19 pandemic response demonstrated that policy changes such as increases to Jobseeker rates, the implementation of the JobKeeper scheme, free childcare, temporary rent relief grants and rent increase prohibitions had a drastic impact upon food security. A survey of people receiving the COVID-19 Supplement payment in early 2020 resulted in a "56% decrease in meal skipping (compared to the original payments), with 93% of respondents also reporting being able to afford eating more fresh fruits and vegetables."[24]

Government has the policy tools for elimination food insecurity and promoting equitable access to healthy diets at its very fingertips. It is time for it to muster the will to implement these changes.

Broadly speaking, these policy opportunities include:

- Policies that promote equitable, wellbeing-centred economic systems that include non-coercive social support payments - such as unemployment support and supplemental income payments, parental and carers payments, disability support payments, rent relief - that are adequate to cover basic needs;
- Broadening the eligibility criteria of people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to publicly funded healthcare, to ensure they have access to culturally safe nutritional and dietary support and care.

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[23] Friel, S., Hattersley, L., and Ford, L., 2015, Evidence review: Addressing the social determinants of inequities in healthy eating, *VicHealth* https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/-/media/ResourceCentre/PublicationsandResources/Health-Inequalities/Fair-Foundations/Full-reviews/HealthEquity-Healthy-eating-review.pdf?la=en&hash=70CC0C66E64269F1CBFCB493570D15915DAE82C0, p8

[24] Zorbas, C., Browne, J., Chung, A. *et al.,* 2023. Shifting the social determinants of food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic: the Australian experience. *Food Sec.* **15**, 151–170 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1007/s12571-022-01318-4 [Accessed 8.2.23]

- The realisation of gender equity in community and education settings, workplaces, and government to eliminate discrimination, engender respect for gender diversity, enable people to live their authentic lives, prevent gender-based violence and create opportunity and a sense of belonging for all. WHGNE notes that the implementation of the Gender Equality Act 2020 has spearheaded this work among defined public entities across Victoria, and we recommend that the Federal Government follows this lead.

Creation of a dedicated, holistic national food plan

Though the Australian Government attempted to develop a unified federal food policy in 2013 to bring together food related activities and initiatives, this plan was shelved, which means we currently lack such a national plan.

However, the development of a holistic national plan, which considers the social determinants of health, the climate impacts of food production and transportation, as well as dietary guidance, has the potential to begin the important work of consolidating Australia's food-related initiatives and planning, and reducing the duplication, contradiction or undermining of policies across diverse government departments.

In developing such a plan, government departments must avoid repeating the mistakes of the 2013 plan, which was heavily criticised for its focus on perpetuating free market-based food system and prioritising the interests of agribusiness and large corporations, over those of communities and small-scale, community level producers. This 2013 plan also skirted around the root cause of food insecurity – inequality and poverty.

As such, we recommend the development of a human rights-based national food plan modelled on the "crowdsourced" Peoples' Food Plan[25] first developed by the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance in 2013 (and to which we contributed feedback and recommendations), and currently in the revision process.

3. What strategies would be most effective to improve affordable community access to healthy food in regional and remote Australia?

Equitable access to healthy food in regional and remote communities depends upon communities having a sense of agency and feeling empowered, enabled, and supported to drive their own strategic planning and activities. When communities feel empowered to drive their own work in this space, not

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[25] Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance, 2013, Peoples' Food Plan. https://afsa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/AFSA_PFP_WorkingPaper-FINAL-15-Feb-2013.pdf [Accessed 8.2.2023]

only might they build self-reliance and resilience, but they can also ensure food projects are culturally appropriate and targeted to local needs.

Community-driven strategies must be supported to centre social justice imperatives and the unique skills, knowledge, needs and aspirations of those most impacted by food insecurity, including (but not limited to) women and single-parent families, Indigenous Australians, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and low-income householders.

We believe the following measures would be effective starting points to achieve culturally appropriate, equitable and affordable access to healthy food in communities like ours:

- Support and resource the creation and activation of inclusive and community-driven local food plans, such as our own region's North East Local Food Strategy,[26] to promote collaborative, cross-sector and grassroots approaches to regional food security and avoid the paternalism of 'top-down' strategies;
- Support and resource regional and remote food networks that are empowered and enabled to drive their own food security/equity projects;
- Support and resource local initiatives such as food hubs, farmers markets, food swaps, community gardens and farms to build food literacy, relocalise food production and build resilience into food supply chains.

4. Are there any other R&D priorities that should be addressed to ensure Australian food systems become more equitable? Which priorities are the most urgent?

WHGNE would like to see the Roadmap prioritise research on how the implementation of a Universal Basic Income (UBI), complemented by a Universal Basic Services (UBS) strategy, might ensure more equitable access to Australian food systems.

A UBI would involve the provision of regular, unconditional, automatic, and adequate income payments to all people as a protection against poverty, while Universal Basic Services would involve the provision of universally accessible basic services – potentially even healthy, fresh, nutritionally dense food to all people - alongside the basic healthcare and education already provisioned by the Australian Government.

There are many UBI models available for consideration; however, we would urge the government to consider a model that would work alongside existing income support payments as a means of establishing social and economic equity in Australia. We would also like to highlight the work of the University of NSW Sydney's in its Minimum Income Standards for Low-income and Unemployed

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[26] North East Local Food Strategy Working Group, 2019, North East Local Food Strategy, https://gatewayhealth.org.au/?resource=north-east-local-food-strategy-2018-2022 [Accessed 16.2.23]

Australians[27], as evidence of work that has already been done to determine what a "basic income" might need to be.

Meanwhile, we urge government to consider the social justice benefits of a UBS like that under consideration in the United Kingdom, and the positive impacts this may have on realising equitable food systems in Australia. A UBS is, in the basic of terms, an enhanced model of publicly funded social services, which includes not only health and education but also housing, food, communications, transport and potentially even energy and water.[28] While a UBI focuses on the consumptive side of an economy, providing an unconditional, minimum basic income for all people, a UBS focuses on the productive elements of an economy, and "refers to an unconditional provision of public services that address needs satisfaction to everyone in society."[29]

Proponents of the idea of a UBS note that it has the potential to "meet needs more directly, increase efficiency, reduce costs, facilitate a vibrant private economy and buttress the institutional fabric of society."[30] It is based on the idea that every person has the *right* to access and enjoy basic services – which very much aligns with the equity approach of this food policy - and it has the potential to challenge some of the harder-to-address social/cultural barriers, such as stigma and harmful rhetoric associated with social welfare, experienced by people experiencing food insecurity.

While we note that a UBS may risk over-providing for large households or households that are already well-provisioned, UBS proponents believe this may be addressed via tradable allocations of goods or services.[31]

Without doubt, implementing a UBI and UBS in Australia would be a politically, socially, and economically complex proposition, however we maintain that increasing rates of food insecurity in Australia, and the deeply embedded social biases, narratives and cultural values that continue to plague this issue, call for a new way of thinking, allocating goods and services and structuring our food system and economy.

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[27] Saunders, P. and Bedford, M., 2017. New Minimum Income for Healthy Living Budget Standards for Low-Paid and Unemployed Australians, *University of NSW Sydney Social Research Centre*, https://www.unsw.edu.au/research/sprc/our-projects/budget-standards-new-healthy-living-minimum-income-standard-low-paid-and-unemployed-australians [Accessed 17.2.23]

[28] Institute for Global Prosperity University College London, 2017. Social prosperity for the future: A proposal for Universal Basic Services. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/igp/sites/bartlett/files/universal_basic_services_-_the_institute_for_global_prosperity_.pdf, page 6 [Accessed 16.2.23]

[29] Büchs,M., 2021. Sustainable welfare: How do universal basic income and universal basic services compare?, *Ecological Economics*, Volume 189, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2021.107152 [Accessed 16.2.23]

[30] Institute for Global Prosperity University College London, 2017. Social prosperity for the future: A proposal for Universal Basic Services. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/igp/sites/bartlett/files/universal_basic_services_-_the_institute_for_global_prosperity_.pdf, page 6 [Accessed 16.2.23]

[31] Büchs,M., 2021. Sustainable welfare: How do universal basic income and universal basic services compare?, *Ecological Economics*, Volume 189, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2021.107152 [Accessed 16.2.23]

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