



Level 1, 1-3 Smail Street  
Ultimo NSW 2007

26 June 2020

To the Committee Secretary  
The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs

### **Inquiry into Food Pricing and Food Security in Remote Indigenous Communities**

We welcome a parliamentary inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities. This submission has been prepared to address points 5 and 6 in the Terms of Reference:

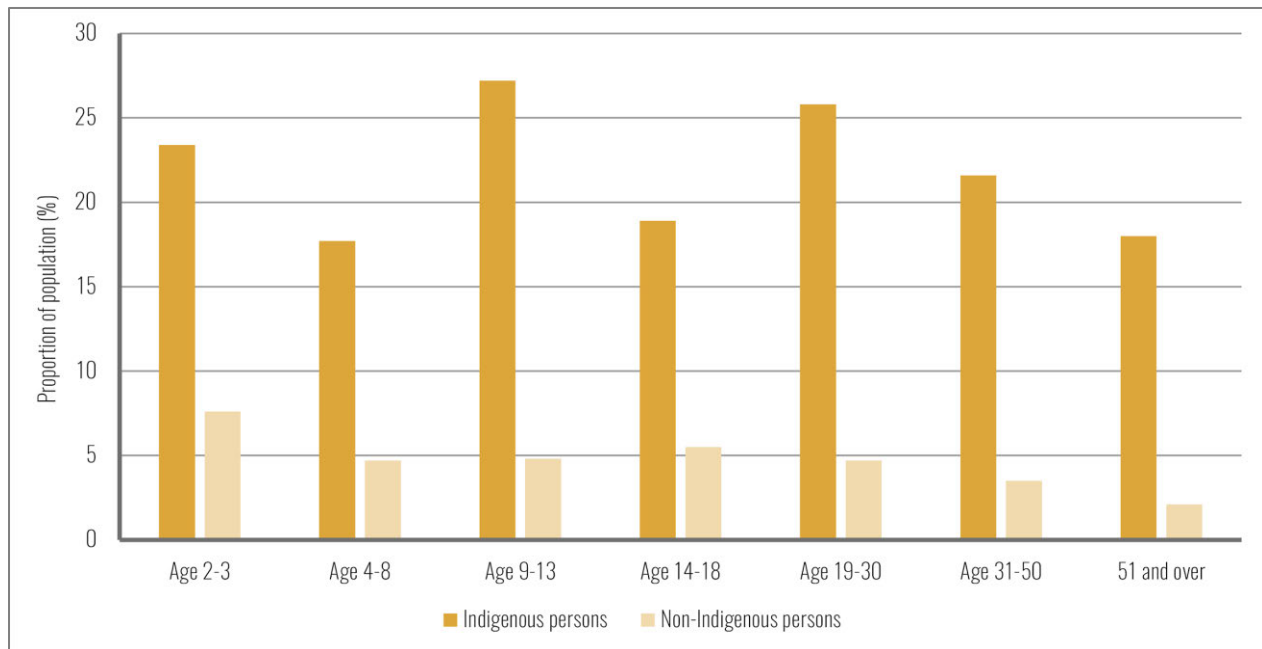
- barriers facing residents in remote communities from having reliable access to affordable fresh and healthy food, groceries and other essential supplies
- the availability and demand for locally produced food in remote communities.

Our starting premise for this submission is that food security is a key social determinant of health. We know that food security is complex. While we are not an organisation directly involved in provision of food, we are a provider of capability and capital support for social and community enterprises involved in the food security agenda (including in Indigenous communities). Sefa is keen to contribute to innovation and a shift in policy and funding frameworks that will result in improved food security in remote Indigenous communities.

Sefa - [www.sefa.com.au](http://www.sefa.com.au) - is a financial solutions provider that partners with purpose-driven organisations and investors to unlock social impact. We enable and structure co-investment as well as providing direct lending and advisory services for social and community enterprises.

Sefa has long been involved in food security through the enterprises we've financed and partnered with. We are concerned that despite Australia's commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, per the Transforming Australia: SDG Progress Report (2018), there is 'need for improvement' if we are to end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round. In particular, the report finds that Indigenous people are disproportionately overrepresented with regards to food insecurity in terms of an absolute lack of food and inability to purchase it (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Food security: whether ran out of food and couldn't afford to buy any more in last 12 months (% population), 2015**



Sefa has experience in food security, having worked with enterprises that are involved in innovative food production solutions, [alternative food systems](#), traditional food businesses, remote stores and place-based solutions for rural/remote communities. After learning that our largest shareholder, the NSW Aboriginal Land Council (NSWALC), needed support for their COVID-19 Food Relief Program, in April 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, we decided to prioritise this agenda.

We have undertaken research, engaged in consultations with stakeholders who contribute to food security for Indigenous communities and have validated our ideas about what longer term, system based sustainable food security solutions could look like. The results of this research are highly relevant to this inquiry.

**Key finding and recommendation:** *Place-based programs are key to achieving food security in Indigenous communities. Successful programs are co-designed with communities, tackle financing as well as access and availability constraints, and are locally led.*

## Challenges

**Food security is a significant problem in Indigenous communities.** States with more remote communities report the most significant levels of Indigenous people worrying about going without food (45% in the Northern Territory, Ride & Lee 2018), however this figure still remains high even in states with more urban-based populations (18% in NSW, Ride & Lee 2018).

**Food security barriers are multifaceted** and vary amongst communities. They relate to:

- prevalence of lower-income-bracket households combined with higher grocery prices in rural and remote areas (Davy, 2016)
- lack of regularly available fresh quality produce (particularly in remote communities) and increasing freight costs
- long distances to stores and lack of transport

- challenges associated with food preparation because of overcrowding, poor storage, lack of access to water and / or lack of cooking facilities
- difficulties accessing charitable support (despite acute needs)

“Malabugilmah Village in northern NSW: The nearest shops are in Grafton 80 kilometres away, making sourcing basic food items challenging at the best of times... The residents are only able to travel to Grafton once or twice a week on a small community bus, and only if there are seats.”  
(NSWALC News)

**There is a level of fatigue and cynicism associated with the approach that has seen the roll out of standardised programs / approaches across communities** - doing so directly contradicts the key principle of community ownership of the design and delivery of locally appropriate programs. Community gardens are an excellent example. Despite widespread enthusiasm for their inclusion in food security approaches, we were informed they work very well in areas with local farming traditions, but they are highly ineffective in communities with no horticultural heritage (i.e. areas in the NT vs the Kimberly in WA). The business model associated with Outback Stores is another example of standardisation which has caused challenges in some communities. Store locations are limited to places where they have the potential to be commercially viable or have external funding. This raises the question of whether the Outback Stores model includes a commitment to making food supply available in smaller communities within the service catchment area of a commercially viable store. Moreover, in our consultations we heard concerns about perceived lack of transparency around income and questions were raised about reinvestment of profits from Outback Stores. We also heard that there were in fact very limited employment and training opportunities associated with Outback Stores.

## Response

**There is no ‘one size fits all’ model.** Sustainable food security approaches consist of multiple elements. Programs need to be multidimensional and during their design phase there are a variety of potential elements that should be canvassed. These include: community gardens, retail stores, local training and employment opportunities, horticultural lessons, micro-enterprises, cooking and nutrition classes, healthy takeaway options, investing in Indigenous bush food businesses, and pricing strategies (e.g. ‘sin’ taxes on unhealthy food). The way in which these elements are deployed and their combinations will vary across communities.

**There are three core principles that should underpin any planning or policy development relating to food security in regional and remote Indigenous communities:**

**1. Communities lead the design of programs to achieve locally determined goals and address local barriers**

Example: Whilst at the core of the [Food Ladder](#) model is a greenhouse in which crops can be grown hydroponically, each community’s experience of Food Ladder will vary according to their underlying circumstances and based on community preferences. Food Ladder offers both a product and a service to support communities develop their own sustainable food growing social enterprise encompassing training and education through to enterprise development.

For example, in Katherine, Food Ladder serves as a healthy hub of community engagement, where nutrition, STEM technology and horticulture is taught, and locals grow fresh food, including indigenous bush foods, in the centre of the town. Providing both employment and meaningful work for Community Development Program (CDP) participants, Food Ladder produce is also sold to local stores/cafes, while produce boxes are available to local residents. In Tennant Creek at the Juno Centre, Food Ladder creates sustainable, Indigenous employment, as well as worthwhile work for CDP participants. Local school children also have the opportunity to grow their own produce, through STEM aligned activities, while a nutritionist is on board to offer advice on healthy eating. Central to the success is the sale of the produce through local stores. Food Ladder has found that, due to the improved quality of the fruit and vegetables produced in the community, by the community, there has been an increase in the purchase and consumption that produce since Food Ladder began.

**2. Empowered local managers are responsible for the delivery of programs (and are able to navigate local power, relationship and cultural nuances)**

Example: In our consultations we heard that store managers don't need to be community leaders or elders, but that they do need to be incentivised and accountable for achieving the food security goals of the community. They need to have the trust of local leaders and leverage local knowledge into operating approaches, for example, tailoring store opening hours to community preferences or providing "less than obvious" resources (i.e. for some communities, wild hunting of kangaroo and fish is a core aspect of local diets and tradition).

**3. Delivery partners (including governments, businesses, not-for-profit and social enterprises) take a long-term lens to the challenge and invest in deep and trusted relationships with local leaders who will understand when and how to use the various potential program elements and associated levers to contribute to program success.**

Example: A research project conducted in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands in South Australia has resulted in an increase in the amount of healthy foods and drinks sold – the first improvement in over 40 years. The project conducted by the Australian Prevention Centre, NPY Women's Council, Nganampa Health Council and Mai Wiru Regional Stores addressed Aboriginal food security and dietary intake in the remote communities of Pipalyatjara and Amata. The project initiated a concerted push to improve the number, range, quality and price of healthy foods in community stores. It also worked with stores to improve good food placement, promotion and healthy takeaway options, making it easier for people to make healthy food choices. Alongside store changes, the project supported community members with healthy eating educational activities including cooking, product demonstrations, budgeting sessions for young people, recipe development and bush picnics. The success of the project is cited as the ability to work collaboratively with partners, communities and stores to strengthen the store nutrition policy and support community demand for, and access to, healthier options.

## **Conclusion**

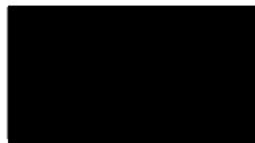
Whilst there have been ongoing food security challenges in Indigenous communities in regional and remote areas (but also in urban areas) for decades, COVID has put a spotlight on the issue and it is

prudent to act now, in a way that balances the need for acute intervention with longer term system level planning. We welcome the parliamentary inquiry and hope that submissions will build on a substantial existing evidence base that leads to real investment in solutions.

Sefa will continue to work with NSWALC and social enterprise partners - we see opportunity to deepen community relationships and engagement to collaboratively identify barriers to food security and then co-design multifaceted programs. We see a central role for social enterprises as contributors to food security outcomes. In particular, we see real value in supporting Indigenous owned bush-food businesses as potential drivers of food security outcomes that also unlock cultural, economic and social impact. We are committed to bringing our network of investors and program delivery partners to participate in financially sustainable programs that create real social impact in communities.

I am happy to discuss any of the information contained in our submission and would welcome the opportunity to engage further with the Committee if requested. Thank you for taking the time to consider Sefa's input.

Your sincerely

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Hanna Ebeling  
CEO

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