

Public Health Association of Australia submission on Strengthening and Safeguarding Food Security in Australia

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Preamble

The Public Health Association of Australia

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) is recognised as the principal non-government organisation for public health in Australia working to promote the health and well-being of all Australians. It is the pre-eminent voice for the public's health in Australia.

The PHAA works to ensure that the public's health is improved through sustained and determined efforts of the Board, the National Office, the State and Territory Branches, the Special Interest Groups and members.

The efforts of the PHAA are enhanced by our vision for a healthy Australia and by engaging with like-minded stakeholders in order to build coalitions of interest that influence public opinion, the media, political parties and governments.

Health is a human right, a vital resource for everyday life, and key factor in sustainability. Health equity and inequity do not exist in isolation from the conditions that underpin people's health. The health status of all people is impacted by the social, cultural, political, environmental and economic determinants of health. Specific focus on these determinants is necessary to reduce the unfair and unjust effects of conditions of living that cause poor health and disease. These determinants underpin the strategic direction of the Association.

All members of the Association are committed to better health outcomes based on these principles.

Vision for a healthy population

A healthy region, a healthy nation, healthy people: living in an equitable society underpinned by a well-functioning ecosystem and a healthy environment, improving and promoting health for all.

The reduction of social and health inequities should be an over-arching goal of national policy and recognised as a key measure of our progress as a society. All public health activities and related government policy should be directed towards reducing social and health inequity nationally and, where possible, internationally.

Mission for the Public Health Association of Australia

As the leading national peak body for public health representation and advocacy, to drive better health outcomes through increased knowledge, better access and equity, evidence informed policy and effective population-based practice in public health.



Introduction

PHAA welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Parliament of Australia's Agriculture Committee for an inquiry into and report on strengthening and safeguarding food security in Australia. This submission will be particularly focusing on the terms of reference concerning impact on supply chain distribution on the cost and availability of food.

Defining Food Security and Insecurity

In Australia we produce enough food to feed approximately 60 million people and still food insecurity is estimated to impact 4-13 per cent of the Australian general population and 22 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Food insecurity is defined as the 'limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable food in socially acceptable ways'. Food security implies that all people have physical access to healthy and sustainable food. Therefore, the inquiry should explicitly consider both the quantity and nutritional quality of food that is available, accessed, and consumed by Australian residents when examining matters related to improving food security and equitable access to food. Food Security is reliant on six different yet interconnected dimensions working together:

- Food availability (sufficient quantities of food of appropriate quality)
- Food access (including financial and physical access)
- Food utilisation (processing and consumption of food)
- Stability (referring to the constancy of the above three dimensions)
- Food agency (the capacity to make decisions about food)
- Sustainability (viability of food systems).

Disruption to any of these dimensions could result in food insecurity. We note that this is a western framework for food security and there are other important definitions which should be considered. For instance, from a collaborative of Aboriginal groups in the Northern Territory, "Food security for us has two parts: food security is when the food from our ancestors is protected and always there for us and our children. It is also when we can easily access and afford the right non-traditional food for a collective healthy and active life". (5) It is important that the inquiry recognises that food insecurity disproportionately impacts individuals who are experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, as well as those living in rural and remote areas, recent migrants, asylum seekers, and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. (6,7)

Health Impacts of Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is associated with increased risk of elevated stress levels, anxiety, depression, smoking, drinking alcohol, and malnutrition.^(8–10) This is often because people who are food insecure may resort to consuming low cost, energy-dense foods (high in fat and sugar), carbohydrate-based meals, fewer plant-based foods, and reducing portion size or skipping meals.^(7,9,11,12) Prolonged food insecurity can cause chronic diseases in later life including diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, hypertension, obesity, nutritional deficiencies, and poor mental health.^(7,9,13–15) For children food insecurity is associated with poor physical, cognitive and emotional development, limiting their ability to achieve academically and reach their full potential.⁽¹⁶⁾ These conditions diminish community participation, burden the health system, and increase healthcare expenditure.^(10,11,17–19)

Supply Chain Disruption Impacts on Food Insecurity

With the onset of climate change, extreme weather events have increased. The capacity of food systems to deliver future food security will be impeded by climate disruption and environmental resource constraints. (20–22) Additionally, global issues such as Putin's war on Ukraine has put pressure on the price of oil, making the transportation of produce expensive, a cost often passed down to consumers. (23) The costs incurred by global and climatic events will be most felt by those who are already food insecure and those at risk of becoming so. Food insecurity and poor dietary health is linked to a complex mix of individual, community, and societal level factors, including employment, access to income, and housing. (24) A comprehensive legislative response to food insecurity must be two-fold: address the actions which can be legislated now to address urgent issues, and a long-term Australian Food Security Plan which ensures the stability, sustainability, equity and resilience of the food system.

PHAA response to strengthening and safeguarding food security in Australia.

The following recommendations regarding strengthening and safeguarding food security will be framed to address four of the six dimensions which constitute food security and how impacts on supply chain distribution affect the cost and availability of food.

Availability

Recent interruptions and changes to the production and transportation stages of the food system demonstrate the need for the Australian Government to fully commit to the Paris agreement targets and commit to developing and implementing an Australian Food Security Plan.

Commit to Reducing Carbon Emissions

As it stands, the Government's current emissions target is a 43 per cent reduction from 2005 levels by 2030 and net zero emissions by 2050. (25) Although this is a step in the right direction, it is misaligned with other countries and not sufficient to meet the Paris Agreement's goal of limiting the global temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. (26,27) PHAA supports a full commitment to the Paris Agreement at the least, but encourages any further action.

Climate change and food security are inextricably linked. As demonstrated in 2022, the widespread flooding in Queensland destroyed vegetable crops, which saw the price of produce soar. The increased frequency of such events will cause continued disruptions to the food supply chain and the ability to grow healthy food; further destabilising cost and unavailability of healthy food. Inevitably, people who are economically disadvantaged (who also are more likely to experience poorer health outcomes), will be affected the most. Additionally, climate change may also reduce the nutrient quality of food, decreasing the availability of healthy food (key to food security). Again, most impacting people who are vulnerable to poorer health. The Government must at the least adhere to Australia's commitment to the Paris Agreement, if not take the commitment further.

Ensure Long-Term Food Availability with a Plan

Climate change will not be the only supply chain disrupter going forward. Events such as COVID-19 and Putin's war in Ukraine have drastically raised the cost of imports, fertiliser, petrol, and natural gas. (31) The Australian government must develop and implement a long-term, human rights based Australian Food

Security Plan, which addresses the six dimensions to food security and outlines the specific responsibilities of the different levels of Government. Under Article 25.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has a right to food. (32) Australia has ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Article 11 (Right to Adequate Food), which obligates states to respect, protect, and fulfil their commitments, but Australia has not legislated the right to food. (33) Ensuring legislation that may address food insecurity now is of utmost urgency and creating a plan for the future is a necessity.

Australian Governments have and are failing to provide leadership and address food security. The inflationary rise of food costs is a result of this unpreparedness. To have reliable availability of food, the Australian Food Security Plan must reflect on how the current crises are interrupting the supply chain from a systems approach (a multilayered analysis aimed to improve the capability of understanding systems, behaviours, and devising modifications to produce desired effects), (34) identify the food system's gaps and weaknesses, lay out preventative and mitigative actions for future supply chain impacts, and ensure greater transparency and accountability for what actions the various levels of government are responsible for.

Access and Utilisation

The access and utilisation of healthy food is dramatically impacted by supply chain disruptions due to increased costs and the previously mentioned decrease in availability. To strengthen and safeguard food security, PHAA recommends that the Australian Food Security Plan address the need for leadership and coordination of emergency food relief, investment in localised and resilient food systems and address the impact that equity has on access and utilisation. However, there are short term policies which should and can be enacted now to reduce the cost burden and these must be given priority.

Co-ordinated Emergency Food Relief

In the Australian Labor Party's 2021 national platform, Labor committed to "providing strong leadership to improve Australia's emergency management capacity and readiness". [25] Emergency food relief to ensure affected communities have access to healthy sustenance must be part of this leadership. Climate disasters can prevent delivery of produce, destroy supermarkets and vehicles, interrupt electricity supply to keep food from spoiling and block roads. The Australian Food Security Plan must include a coordinated outline of how to best provide emergency food relief to disaster-struck communities. However, emergency food relief offers a vital immediate response to the serious public health issue of food insecurity, it is not a substitute for whole community or public policy level solutions to address the root cause of food insecurity. [35,36]

Invest in Local Food System Resiliency

Further, as seen in the 2019/2020 bushfires and the 2022 floods, recovery efforts have lasted months. (37) Although initial relief to food insecurity with canned goods and non-perishables is understandable, (37) it is not an appropriate to still be providing food parcels and pantries to people long-term. There needs to be steady investment into making local food systems more resilient and protect regional and rural communities from suffering food shortages or accessibility issues associated with natural hazards. A resilient food system is "a system that can withstand and recover from disruptions in a way that ensures a sufficient supply of acceptable and accessible food for all". (38) Again, the Labor platform espouses leadership in adaption and resilience investments in the face of climate change. (25) There is no current short or long-term plan to address local food resilience, leaving tens of thousands of Australians vulnerable to the next disaster. In the development of an Australian Food Security Plan, local level government's food security initiatives must be supported. Resilience plans should be community-led, with state and federal governments providing broader systems thinking interventions and supports.

Address Equity in Food Security Now and Long-Term

Charities offering food relief are vital in managing food insecurity, however, they cannot consistently be Government's crutch while no community or public policy level solutions to address the root cause of food insecurity are made. Any development of a food security plan must address equitable access and utilisation of nutritious food as a human right. With global and environmental supply chain disruptions causing an increase to the cost-of-living, (7,9,11,12,39) many people see food as the only flexible budget item. Only by decreasing what they spend on food (which is further exacerbated by increases in food costs) can they keep a roof over their heads and the lights on. This largely includes rural communities, people on lower incomes and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These communities already experience chronic food insecurity due to food deserts (certain areas have a higher proportion of energy rich, nutrient low food, i.e., a lack of supermarket access), the cost of produce versus fast-food, lack of diverse range of foods and poor road infrastructure. (7,40) Supply chain disruptions compound these inequities. Inequities are avoidable and the level of poverty in a country is a choice. We urge the Government to provide strong leadership on food security, to implement interventions which address the social and economic determinants of food insecurity, including those relating to income, social welfare, and housing. We strongly encourage that the Plan be developed with input representing the diversity of those affected by food insecurity and those with lived experience.

Long-term, food security needs a Plan, however some Australians don't have years to wait for this, there are policies the Government must legislate now to address food insecurity. PHAA recommends conducting regular and national household food security monitoring, utilising the full 18-item United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Household Food Security Survey Module. (41) National data on food security has not been collected since the 2011-12 Australian Health Survey, therefore it is inadequate to inform current policies. The USDA survey has been adopted by other countries (41) and is identified as an appropriate model in an Australian context too. Also, the Government should continue to exempt fruit and vegetables from the 10 per cent goods and services tax, provide transparency between commercial partnerships in the food industry, raise the rate of the Remote Area Allowance to supplement income support payments in higher cost of living regions, work closely with local community groups to identify areas of improvement and healthy food education, (42) and most crucially, increase income support payments to above the poverty line and index these payments to wage growth. This can be achieved with the scrapping of the stage three tax cuts. We must emphasise, with Australia's inflation set to rise over the following years, (43) the number of food insecure people will grow. Charities that provide food relief are essential but should not be viewed as a substitute for adequate income support payments.

Stability

Ten years of inaction, we need an Australian Food Security Plan now

As discussed, climate change, geopolitics and resources are destabilising our food system and supply chain distribution, causing increased costs of fresh produce and unreliable availability. The repercussions of this are being felt by all Australians, but particularly people with existing vulnerabilities. Western Australia has had a food security plan since 2014, (44) Canada started consultations in 2017, (45) the Association of Southeast Asian Nations released theirs in 2020, (46) yet at a national level in Australia, the last National Food and Nutrition Policy in was developed in 1992. (47) There has been a gap in leadership in terms of preparing for the instability we knew a changing climate and unpredictable global political stage may bring. Clearly this needs to be rectified.

Plan For Climate Change

The Australian Food Security Plan should explicitly include climate and how the food system will respond, using both mitigative and adaptive actions to the threat of climate disruption and other geopolitical threats on food supply and equitable food access. It should be developed with climate change, food system and public health experts, which centres a human rights-based approach to food. As part of the Plan, the Australian Government should create a Food Systems and Food Security Council responsible for implementing and reporting on the Australian Food Security Plan and acting as a single coordinating body to address issues in the Australian Food System. This Council should include representation from across all government departments as well as the stakeholder groups (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culturally and linguistically diverse groups, civil society, health, environment, research, non-industrial food producers, social and community services).

Conclusion

PHAA supports the broad directions of the inquiry and report on strengthening and safeguarding food security in Australia. However, we are keen to ensure that short-term, long-term, and human rights are emphasised in line with this submission. We are particularly keen that the following points are highlighted:

- Commit fully to the Paris Agreement at the least but take actions further to reduce the severity and impacts of climate change.
- An Australian Food Security Plan must be developed and implemented with a long-term and human rights focus. It must also explicitly include climate change as a key factor.
- Invest in local food system resiliency to protect regional and rural communities from food shortages or accessibility issues associated with natural hazards.
- National data needs to be collected on food security.
- Fruit and vegetables should be exempt from the 10 percent goods and services tax.
- Income support payments must be above the poverty line and indexed to wage growth.

The PHAA appreciates the opportunity to make this submission. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require additional information or have any queries in relation to this submission.

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