

**Submission
No 58**

FOOD PRODUCTION AND SUPPLY IN NSW

Organisation: Right to Food Coalition

Date Received: 28 February 2022



**Submission to
NSW Parliamentary Enquiry into Food Production & Supply**

Right to Food Coalition

2022

Mr AH Greenwich
Chair, Legislative Assembly Committee on Environment and Planning
NSW Parliament House
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Dear Mr Greenwich

Submission to NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Food Production and Supply

I am making this submission on behalf of Australia's Right to Food Coalition (ARFC), which works to improve public policy to ensure the right to food for all Australians.

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to this important Parliamentary Inquiry into Food Production and Supply in NSW. We would be happy to speak at the hearing.

Introduction

ARFC is a voluntary organisation comprising health, community and social workers, academics, dietitians, NGOs, community gardeners, food relief organisations and food justice and human rights advocates. Our members are variously engaged in research on, and have expertise in the topics of food security, health, retail, farming, community food projects and emergency food relief.

We believe that everyone in Australia has a right to healthy food, which should be enshrined in State and Commonwealth legislation. Using a rights-based framework implies an upholding of human dignity in acquisition of food, encompasses a legal entitlement, and can be used to assign accountability for food security. ARFC particularly welcomes the fact that the first point in the Terms of Reference refers to 'improving food security' and 'ensuring equity of access to healthy food for all'. We believe that these two aims should indeed be the starting point of this inquiry.

The Covid pandemic highlighted the inequality of access to one of the most basic of human rights, that is the right to access reliable and nutritious food. However, the right of all citizens to nutritious food is too often overlooked, in framing food primarily as a commodity rather than understanding its role as an essential resource to enable all Australians to lead a fully participating and healthy life.

We have been content for too long to accept that a significant number of people routinely go hungry or have severely limited dietary options, with long-term impacts on their physical and mental health, and employment and educational options. Food insecurity has particularly severe impact on children; the 2021 report showed that 43% of kids of food insecure parents regularly missed eating at least one day a week. This is not ethically acceptable, and many studies have shown that as well as being personally 'costly', significant future costs are likely to arise through increased use of health and mental health services. This has a direct impact on state health budgets.

While acknowledging that the inquiry canvases many important issues relating to future challenges to the food system such as climate change, urban expansion, water security in face of drought and mining incursions, this submission will focus on the issue of food security and equitable access to healthy food.

Several **key issues** need to be addressed.



Routine data collection on food security and food access needs to be established

There is no standard tool or routine collection of information on the prevalence of food insecurity for individuals, households and communities. Many organisations have undertaken to fill this gap, mostly with small scale surveys of particular community groups. While these surveys are welcome, and are indeed important for understanding the different factors, drivers and solutions for different communities, they cannot perform the function of regular monitoring at a state and national level.

Without this data it is also not possible to set targets for improvement, to assess the effectiveness of policies and programs, and to hold agencies accountable for implementing change.

Recommendation: In the absence of national leadership, the NSW government initiate regular monitoring of food security using the six item United States Department of Agriculture Food Security Survey Module or similar.

Ensuring income support programs are adequate to allow access to a healthy diet

Despite 28 years of continual economic growth in Australia, the base rate for those seeking work has remained almost the same for 25 years. Even pensions have risen to reflect the cost of living while Newstart remains virtually static. Meanwhile the price of staples has risen faster than the CPI, putting healthy food out of reach for too many Australian families.

During the pandemic, many people and groups experienced food insecurity for the first time. Particularly hard hit were overseas students and asylum seekers with no source of support. Also affected were young people, many of whom were employed in casual jobs and in the gig economy and suffered loss of income. Some estimates showed that 65% of young people were going hungry at least once a week. Shortages of supplies and volunteers exacerbated the lack of co-ordination of services, and highlighted the problems of relying on this patchwork of backup services.

While the pandemic caused massive increases in food insecurity, it also provided a ‘natural experiment’ to back up assertions by food justice advocates that poor diets are influenced more by economic resources than by personal choice; an ACOSS survey during the period of Jobkeeper supplements found 93% of welfare recipients were able to eat fresh fruit and vegetables, and 83% reported that they could now eat regularly, and more healthily. Conversely in a subsequent ACOSS survey 80% of respondents said that when the coronavirus supplement was reduced in September 2020, they would have to skip meals and reduce how much fresh fruit and vegetables they bought.

Recommendation

While the Federal government controls welfare rates, all States have a role to play in advocating through COAG for increased welfare support indexed twice a year, to meet requirements for living a healthy life

The NSW Govt should investigate other opportunities to improve affordability of healthy foods, for example through subsidies for fresh food transport to regional and remote areas.



End the reliance on Emergency Food Relief as the solution to food insecurity

In NSW as in many other jurisdictions, the principal ‘answer’ to food insecurity is to rely on emergency food relief (EFR). The inadequacy of this approach is evident in the rapid growth of EFR services; the core problems are not being addressed and food charity does not alter the power dynamic that perpetuates food insecurity. (Lindberg et al, 2022). In addition, recent research has shown that food in EFR services can have many shortcomings, including unreliability of supply, being of poor quality, not fresh, close to or past use-by dates, and not appropriate to the communities which are relying on it. (Sheriff et al 2022).

While EFR can provide some short-term relief for those in need, in the absence of a systematic approach to addressing food insecurity, it does not result in the long-term alleviation of food insecurity (Bazerghi et al, 2016). EFR cannot be thought of as a long-term strategy to address food insecurity, rather it functions best as a food waste-reduction strategy.

Enabling and supporting healthy food environments

Research shows that food environments play a key role in food intake. There is abundant evidence of ‘food deserts’, commonly in the outer metropolitan areas where lower income families are concentrated, where fast food outlets vastly outnumber fresh food outlets, with consequent influence on food consumption. This has been shown to produce intergenerational effects on eating habits, for example with some Aboriginal families identifying poor quality foods like devon and white bread as ‘cultural foods’. (Sheriff et al 2022.)

In Victoria, a long-term collaboration between VicHealth and Victorian Local Governments has worked to develop food policies, funding and programs to improve food environments at a local level, taking into account food access, opportunities for urban and peri urban agriculture, connection with farmers, local jobs and contributions to the local economy.

It is important to provide support for this work at the highest level in the state. We advocate for explicit health outcomes to be included in NSW State planning documents. Much work has been done at a local level to support work building healthy environments, but this has been operationalised into far more strategies to build environments supportive of physical activity than of healthy eating. This imbalance needs to be addressed.

Recommendation

The NSW government work with local governments to improve local food environments. One example would be to strengthen LGA capacity to control outlets selling what the American food advocate Michael Pollan accurately calls ‘food-like substances’. Another example would be to investigate funding for programs to implement community-driven solutions to food access.

Health outcomes should be an explicit inclusion in NSW State Planning documents.



What is needed to address the recommendations above?

Commitment by the NSW Government to its legal and moral obligations to guarantee the human right to adequate and culturally appropriate food for all

It might surprise many to realise that in Australia, the right to food is not well established in law, and as such, there is a risk that no institution can be held accountable to ‘respect, protect and maintain’ the right to food. While Australia is a signatory to the UN Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which includes ‘adequate food’ as a key human right, the UDHR is not legally binding under international law. However, Australia is a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which both cite the need for governments to take responsibility for provision of nutritious food.

Unlike some other states, NSW does not have a Charter of Human Rights. Making a strong statement of responsibility for ensuring the right to healthy food for all in NSW would provide an umbrella for this work.

Collaboration across NSW government, and with Federal and Local Government

We acknowledge that food security, food access and food systems cover a wide range of complex and interlocking issues. To address them will require collaboration between a number of NSW Government Departments (including Health, Planning and Environment, Agriculture, Industry, Justice and Families) as well as liaison and advocacy with other levels of government, both Federal and Local Government.

Consider setting up dedicated infrastructure in NSW such as the Food Security and Food Systems Committee recommended by submissions from Reeve et al to this Inquiry.

In relation to equitable food access, this body would:

- Take responsibility for comprehensive monitoring of food security in NSW, to build a nuanced understanding of the prevalence, drivers and risks;
- Use this information to develop contingency planning to better prepare for future shocks such as pandemics, impacts of climate change (drought, severe weather events), interruptions to fuel or supply shortages;
- Include those with lived experience of food insecurity, including First Nations and other community representatives with their expertise on what is needed to improve FS in their communities. Ensure that targets are set, funding and resources made available, so that governments at all levels can be held accountable;
- Make funding available for programs to be conducted at a local level;
- Work with local councils to strengthen laws to allow better control of healthy food environments; and
- Explore options to ensure fresh and affordable food is available in outer regional and rural areas.



We would be happy to provide any more information that you may require and to discuss further at the hearing.

Yours sincerely

Liz Millen

for

Right to Food Coalition

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