

STORES LICENSING SCHEME IN REMOTE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY: A META-EVALUATION

POLICY BRIEF, NOVEMBER 22, 2023

PURPOSE

The Australian Government's Stores Licensing Scheme, under the Northern Territory Emergency Response Act 2007 (NTER) and the Stronger Futures Northern Territory Act 2012 (SFNT), introduced nutrition-sensitive measures regarding community food security, having the potential to improve nutrition outcomes. We examined evaluations of the Australian Government's Stores Licensing Scheme under these Acts, to provide the opportunity to inform the next iteration of Stores Licensing under the Northern Territory Government (the NT Food Security Program) and the National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations Communities. This policy brief provides a summary of what we did, our key findings and recommendations.

ISSUE

In the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia, seventy percent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population live in remote areas, where access to goods and services is highly restricted. Often a singular community store provides the majority of the community's food supply, alongside household procurement of traditional foods, and these stores significantly influence a community's ability to achieve food security. Logistical challenges with food provisioning such as limited freight deliveries, seasonal weather disruptions, and extensive food mileage are often experienced in these communities. The Australian Government's Stores Licensing Scheme introduced a set of minimum requirements for remote stores in the NT to ensure the promotion of food security for Aboriginal communities in the NT. These requirements included a satisfactory range of healthy and good quality food and drink, and stores taking reasonable steps to promote good nutrition and healthy products.

WHAT WE DID

We used a meta-evaluative approach to systematically capture all grey literature primary research reports related to the Stores Licensing scheme under the NTER and SFNT Acts, excluding all other schemes. Three comprehensive search strategies were employed: a database search using Trove (Australian National Library) database, a customised Google search, and a targeted website search, as well as contacting a content expert to ensure comprehensiveness. 151 evaluation reports were identified. Nine reports met the inclusion criteria and were included. Reported outcomes were extracted, and barriers and enablers were determined using thematic analysis. A quality assessment was conducted for all included evaluations using a quality framework (AACODS checklist).

KEY FINDINGS

- The majority of evaluations were commissioned by the Australian Government.
- Some improvements were identified in the quality, range and promotion of healthy foods.
- Reliable management was seen as an enabler to Stores Licensing aims.
- Lack of opportunities to increase governance capacity for Store Directors and for input from community members was identified.
- Continued high food pricing impacted food security.
- A remote healthy food subsidy, measures to incentivise stores to improve standards, and improved governance arrangements to allow for self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Store Directors was needed.

DETAILS OF THE FINDINGS

This meta-evaluation broadly suggests Stores Licensing contributed to improved food security outcomes in community stores, with some differences in reported outcomes across the evaluations. The majority of evaluations were commissioned by the Australian Government. Less than half of the evaluations had an aim to specifically seek to understand the perspectives and opinions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples with regards to the Acts.

Improvements in quality of foods available: In some evaluations, improvements were reported in the quality of foods available in community stores with Stores Licensing. However, in most there were discrepancies in responses of those interviewed to whether food quality had improved with the implementation of Stores Licensing. Four evaluations reported improvements in the range and promotion of healthy foods, including fruit and vegetables, in community stores. Four evaluations offered mixed responses regarding food availability, with some communities reporting no increased access to healthy foods since Stores Licensing.

Reliable management of stores: Reliable management of stores was seen as an enabler to Stores Licensing achieving its aims and goals. This involved store managers who facilitated modifications to their store in line with legislation requirements, robust management practices, and the Licensing assessment processes providing incentive for store managers to adhere to requirements.

Governance of community stores: Despite Stores Licensing, ongoing issues associated with the governance of community stores was reported, with a lack of opportunity for input from communities into the decision-making regarding stores and lack of governance capacity building of Aboriginal store directors. Also reported was less benefit from Stores Licensing to perceived high performing stores. However, data suggest that Stores Licensing improved the standard of management and retail operation of previously lower performing stores.

Persistent high food prices: High food cost was reported by stakeholders as a limitation to food accessibility in the majority of evaluations. A consistent recommendation described in the data was a call to the Australian Government to consider subsidising food in remote community stores.

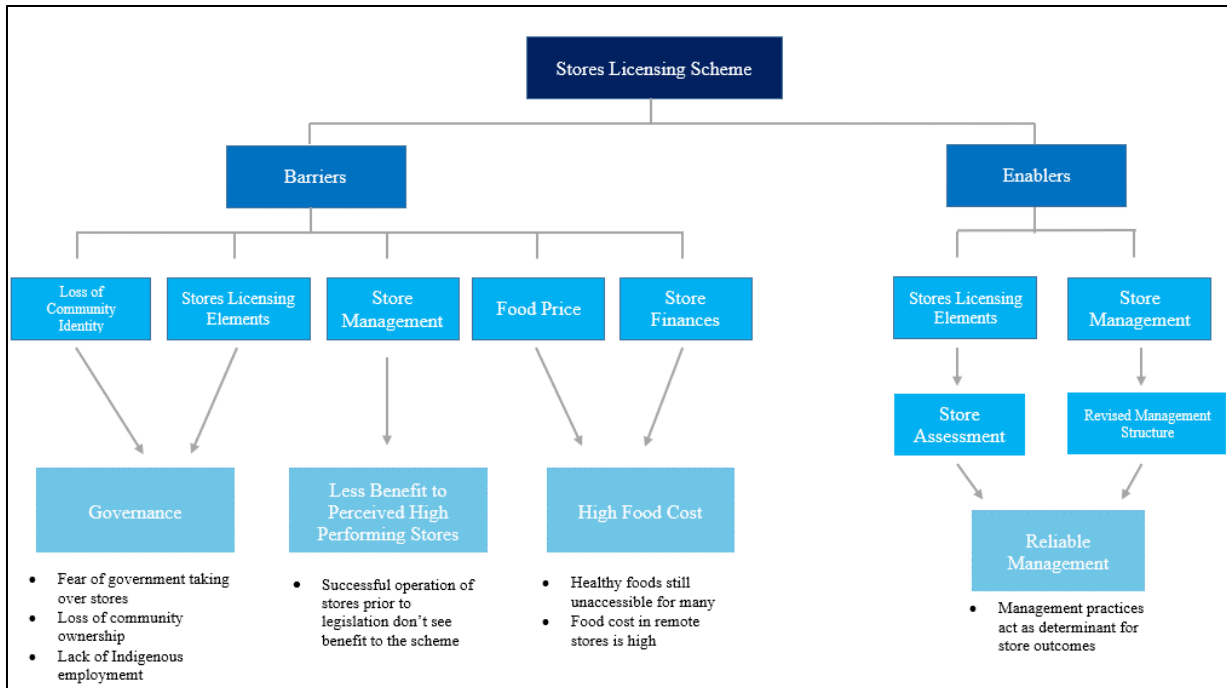


Figure 1. Coding tree of perceived barriers and enablers to the Stores Licensing Scheme.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We note the importance of engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in the commissioning, design, interpretation, and development of an evaluation to accurately capture the lived experiences and aspirations of those impacted by the program and ensure culturally sensitive practices that centre Indigenous knowledges.

With consistent reporting of the high cost of food in remote stores as an ongoing barrier to food security, consideration of the ongoing issue of high food pricing in the NTER and SFNT Acts was a missed opportunity in addressing one of the key determinants of food security. If the issue of food affordability for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote Australia continues to be ignored, it will further impede the attainment of the Close the Gap outcomes.

This meta-evaluation indicates that in order to support remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in achieving food security, future policy should consider:

- a healthy food subsidy
- measures to incentivise all and lift the benchmark for higher performing stores
- improved governance arrangements enabling self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Store Directors.

Future iterations of Stores Licensing should consider a tailored and culturally safe approach to governance training that recognises the committee, and their in-depth insights into their communities, as the decision-making authority for their store.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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