

# **Inquiry into food pricing and food security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in remote Australia: Monash University submission**

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## FOREWORD

Monash University is committed to making a substantial and ongoing contribution to reconciliation by fostering mutually-beneficial partnerships with Indigenous peoples and communities as outlined in the [Monash Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Framework](#). By deepening and enhancing the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Monash has committed to expanding contributions to: – reduce the disparity in disadvantage experienced by Indigenous Australians; – elevate the visibility of Indigenous expertise, excellence and contributions to society; – acknowledge and support the rights, languages and cultures of Indigenous communities; – tackle racism and the impact it has on Indigenous people and communities; and – promote equal opportunity and outcomes for all Australians.

We commend the Australian government for holding this inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and hope from this inquiry that real change will come that will empower First Nations Peoples living in remote regions of Australia with the resources needed to enjoy equal access to safe, quality, nutritious and affordable food for a healthy life and contribute to reducing disparities in disadvantage experienced by First Nations Peoples.

This submission has been prepared by academics and PhD students within the Department of Nutrition Dietetics and Food Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Clinical Sciences, the William Cooper Institute, and the Monash Sustainability Development Institute. As researchers we aim to provide evidence for necessary change to policy and practice. This submission is based on a body of research largely undertaken by members of our authorship team and our colleagues with Menzies School of Health Research and University of Queensland, and food retail, and Aboriginal health service collaborators, including Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation, Outback Stores and Apunipima Cape York Health Council. This research has focused on informing practice and policy in the area of improved health and nutrition for First Nations Peoples in remote communities with a focus on the food retail sector in remote communities.

Our submission is presented in two parts. The first part addresses the terms of reference of the inquiry and our recommendations. The second part reminds the inquiry panel of past inquiries and evaluations related to remote community stores and the outcomes of these as reported by the Auditor-General ANAO Report no. 2 2014-2015 performance audit on food security in remote Indigenous communities. Indeed, a number of the recommendations we make in this submission echo recommendations from past endeavour to address food and nutrition issues in remote Australia.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Food price and food security matter for health, wellbeing and cultural survival. Differences in food price of up to 60% between remote communities and urban areas have been reported for decades. This price differential is inevitable due to the buying power, high operating costs, and remoteness of communities from food distribution centres. High food prices however coupled with low income underpin the widespread food insecurity experienced by First Nations Peoples living in remote communities. The result of this contributes to the excessive burden of preventable chronic disease and high prevalence of childhood undernutrition and anaemia, noting the contributions also of other social and cultural determinants of health, along with the complex and historical factors of settlement and colonisation that continue to impact on communities at enormous cultural, social and economic cost. Lack of consideration by the Australian government of nutrition as a fundamental building block for the health and cultural survival of First Nations Peoples, and that of the nation, has been coined “the gap”, in the Australian government Closing the Gap policy. Policy to support healthier diets in remote communities is critically needed to close the disparity in disadvantage experienced by First Nations Peoples in remote communities, including the high cost of food and food affordability.

Primarily a holistic approach to policy to address high food prices and food affordability is required with consideration of the whole food system including both the food retail sector and the local food economy of First Nations communities and biodiversity and ecosystems. For all human cultures, food is at the core of cultural identity – food is more than its nutrients and component parts. First Nations Peoples of Australia for millennia had sovereignty of their food systems and pathways and successfully provided for their food and health and wellbeing needs and passed on knowledge of food for generations. This relationship between food and health and wellbeing is central to a successful and sustainable food system. Improvements in food pricing and food security for First Nations remote communities cannot overlook this important relationship.

Creating a food system that protects from food insecurity, is resilient to shocks, and has self-determination at its governing core, requires recognition of the food and nutrition knowledges of First Nations Peoples and their capacity for intergenerational knowledge transfer. Harnessing this capacity through resourcing a National First Nations food and nutrition program that employs First Nations Peoples as food and nutrition practitioners to promote both First Nations and western knowledges of food and nutrition for health and wellbeing in their communities is needed. An adequately resourced public health nutrition workforce is also needed to support this program.

Food retail businesses in remote communities provide a significant proportion of a community’s food and nutritional needs. Unique models of community ownership and sovereignty of food retail in First Nations communities in remote Australia exist where the wellbeing of the community is integral to the business model. These models must be recognised, celebrated and be built on and not be lost or dismissed by a quest for a more efficient model of food retail in remote communities that does not consider what First Nations Peoples want for their stores.

Since the 2009 Inquiry in to community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, extensive activity led by academics, government personnel, Aboriginal health services and the remote food retail sector itself, has occurred, to generate the tools and know-how to support health-enabling best-practice in remote food retail. The next step is to draw upon this evidence to establish a National Strong Stores Benchmarking and Accreditation Scheme that supports the remote food retail sector across Australia to put in place the retail standards needed to promote health and wellbeing among their customers. These standards include First Nations employment and training, fair pricing, restricted marketing of discretionary food and beverages, and stocking, quality and promotion of healthier food and beverages and essential non-food items.

Our submission draws on our experience as public health, nutrition, education, and sustainability specialists and therefore takes a public health and wellbeing focus. We believe food retail in First Nations communities is at a crossroad where the combination of over two decades of empirical high-quality research evidence specific to the Australian remote food retail sector, with remote retail business and operations expertise, and First Nations leadership, can create a unique, flourishing and resilient food retail sector in Australia that meets community, business and public health goals.

Based on our presentation of the evidence and recommendations from the previous inquiry and evaluations we make recommendations for consideration by the inquiry. The principals underpinning our recommendations are consistent with imperatives to uphold and ensure the Sustainable Development Goals for all people and communities across the world, which the Australian Government has endorsed.

## **We recommend:**

### **1. The environment in which remote community retailers operate**

- 1.1 Decisions on how the retail sector should operate in remote communities be made with and by First Nations Peoples as a policy imperative.
- 1.2 Unique models of food retail in remote communities with First Nations Peoples at the helm in decision-making, be celebrated, strengthened and drawn on to inform the future of the remote food retail sector.
- 1.3 The Australian Government give appropriate policy recognition across all government sectors to food and nutrition as a fundamental building block for the health and cultural survival of First Nations Peoples, and of the nation.

### **2. The license and regulation requirements and administration of remote community stores**

- 2.1 The Stronger Futures Northern Territory Act 2012 food security matter (a), include a provision for fairly priced food and non-food items and this be assessed as part of the Community Store Licensing regime.
- 2.2 The Community Store Licensing regime to prioritise the reporting of food retail business performance on the Stronger Futures Policy Act 2012 food security matters to the community in which the business operates, and provide an independent evaluation report on its overall performance to the First Nations community and wider public. This evaluation is critical to inform future policy related to food supply and access for First Nations communities.
- 2.3 The Healthy Stores 2020 strategy, a food retail strategy shown to reduce sales of unhealthy food and not impact business profit, be scaled through a National Benchmarking and Accreditation scheme, and/or through regulatory instruments such as the Community Store Licensing regime and food retail business lease agreements with Lands Councils, and there be dedicated resources including trained personnel to assist store owners, their managers and staff make the conversion to Healthy Stores 2020. ALPA, has the know-how and skills to support the scale of this strategy across remote communities and the Healthy Stores 2020 research collaborative has the skills to evaluate it.
- 2.4 A National Strong Stores Benchmarking and Accreditation scheme be established and adequately resourced to support the remote food retail sector to implement evidence-informed best-practice standards, including the Healthy Stores 2020 strategy and evidence-informed price incentives, to achieve public health and business goals for community health, wellbeing and food security, including the establishment of:
  - A First Nations governance structure for oversight of the scheme,
  - First Nations store appraisal and support teams in the Northern Territory and other states adequately equipped with knowledge, skills and resources to support the food retail sector attain best-practice standards
  - An Evaluation team with access to purpose-built technology designed to report on key best-practice performance indicators including benchmark criteria and sales of key food categories (e.g., discretionary food and beverage spend relative to total food spend), using point-of-sale data securely and appropriately collected from food retail businesses across the remote food retail sector.

## **We recommend:**

### **3. The governance arrangement for remote community stores**

- 3.1 Determinants of food price in the remote food retail sector be investigated using a systems and future-thinking framework to capture the complexity of determinants, their interrelatedness and susceptibility to future shocks (e.g., climate change), and evidence from this be used to determine the most cost-effective, sustainable and feasible policy options available to enable First Nations Peoples in remote communities achieve Australian Dietary Guidelines.
- 3.2 In partnership with First Nations communities and the remote food retail sector, build on technology that utilizes point-of-sale data to report key food and nutrition indicators, to establish a continuous improvement and monitoring and evaluation system that can inform decision-making at all levels from the food retail business and community level through to local, regional and state/territory and national government levels (see recommendation 2.6).

### **4. Comparative pricing in other non-remote remote communities and regional centers**

- 4.1 Food price monitoring and reporting be implemented as part of the National Strong Stores Benchmarking and Accreditation scheme, that utilizes point-of-sale data and technology, and a trained First Nations workforce, to:
  - collect accurate data on the cost of an evidence-informed standardized food basket, and,
  - provide timely reports on performance of food price relative to food price benchmarks to store owners, communities and state/territory and national governments.

### **5. Barriers facing residents in remote communities from having reliable access to affordable fresh and healthy food, groceries and other essential supplies**

- 5.1 The recommendation of the Australian Council of Social Services to “continue the new JobSeeker payment of \$560 per week until a social security system is put in place that keeps everyone out of poverty” (ACOSS May 25 2020) be considered by the Australian government, together with the cost of living relief recommendations in the March 2020 report of the Northern Territory Council of Social Services, in determining the post Covid-19 social security payment for First Nations Peoples in remote communities.
- 5.2 Based on our Recommendation 3.1, there be consideration by governments with First Nations leaders and retailers to apply cost-effective and feasible policy options to achieve food price equity. We recommend that alongside these policy options, that measures to restrict marketing of unhealthy food and beverages be put in place (such as the Healthy Stores 2020 strategy) to mitigate increased spend on unhealthy food and beverages.
- 5.3 A National First Nations Food & Nutrition program be established to increase healthy food choices and behaviours amongst First Nations peoples and communities. The program could encourage intergenerational transfer of traditional food practices, and be modelled on the highly successful Tackling Indigenous Smoking program. The First Nations Food & Nutrition workforce could also be trained to conduct store appraisals and provide support to stores as per the proposed National Strong Stores Benchmarking and Accreditation scheme recommendation 2.4. This could be modeled on the previous ALPA Good Food program.

5.4 There be consideration given by governments for an adequately resourced public health nutrition practitioner workforce linked with the National First Nations Food and Nutrition program to support best-practice standards in the remote food retail sector and other community food services, and the implementation of food and nutrition promotion strategies in the wider community that give equal value to First Nations food and nutrition knowledges as western knowledges and apply a 'supportive environments' approach.

### **We recommend:**

#### **6. The availability and demand for locally produced food in remote communities**

6.1 In partnership with First Nations leaders, the Australian Government act and further build upon existing recommendations from the 2009 House of Representatives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee 'Everybody's Business' report pertaining to locally produced foods, namely:

- Support and fund First Nations-led food, farming and community gardening enterprises for the local production of food and local employment and invest in research into their long-term viability and sustainability (Recommendation 17)
- Fund research and programs to support First Nations-led enterprises to distribute, process and sell locally grown and harvested food sources (Recommendation 19)
- Formalise collaborative partnerships between First Nations-led food harvest/production enterprises and the remote food retail sector. Expand operations of stores to also function as market places for First Nations grown and processed produce, with research and development to ensure compliance with food safety regulations. An outcome of this inquiry should be funding for a partnership pilot which requires a remote store enterprise (e.g., ALPA, Outback Stores, and/or Mai Wiru) to purchase an annual minimum of goods produced by First Nations-led food production enterprises. (Recommendation 20).

6.2 In partnership with First Nations leaders, the Australian Government fund the routine data collection of First Nations Peoples' traditional food intake through National Nutrition surveys to address the paucity of official statistics.

#### **7. The role of Australia's food and grocery manufacturers and suppliers in ensuring adequate supply to Remote Communities**

7.1 Food industry be engaged with First Nations leaders and the remote food retail sector to determine how they can most effectively, sustainably, fairly and respectfully contribute to addressing food price inequity in First Nations remote communities (see Recommendations 3.1 and 5.2)

#### **8. The effectiveness of federal, state and territory consumer protection laws and regulators**

8.1 The effectiveness of federal, state and territory consumer protection laws and regulators be investigated and strengthened including protection of consumers from unfair pricing and marketing of discretionary food and beverages, and programs be funded to ensure customers can make informed food purchasing decisions at point-of-sale.

## **We recommend:**

### **9. Other relevant factors**

9.1 Food security for First Nations communities in remote Australia be considered within the context of the whole food system, including climate, biodiversity and ecosystems more generally.

9.2 Consideration be given by the Australian Government to fund the Remote Stores Symposium planned for March 2021. This symposium provides a platform to engage First Nations leaders and the remote food retail sector in determining the future of the remote food retail sector based on the Government response to this inquiry on food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities.

## PART 1 RESPONSE TO TERMS OF REFERENCE

### THE ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH REMOTE COMMUNITY RETAILERS OPERATE

- 1.1 As stated in the [United Nations Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), Articles 3 and 18 “Indigenous Peoples have the right to self-determination.<sup>1</sup> By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” and have the “right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own indigenous decision-making institutions”
- 1.2 Policy throughout the history of Australia since colonisation has shaped the contemporary food supply of remote communities including Aboriginal Protection Policies, the Welfare Ordinance 1953 (NT) without First Nations Peoples participating in decision-making. It is a policy imperative that decisions made on how the retail sector should operate in remote communities are made with and by First Nations Peoples.
- 1.3 A large proportion of retail businesses operate on Lands under Native Title. Unique models of First Nations sovereignty of food retail in remote Australia therefore exist. The model of community ownership of a food retail business is vastly different from that of the mainstream food retail sector dominated by the Australian supermarket duopoly and largely driven by profit for the benefit of company shareholders. The Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation (ALPA) model where member communities are shareholders and represented on the ALPA board, has been successful in combining community, business and public health goals.<sup>2</sup>
- 1.4 The combination of these goals is a unique feature of the remote Australia food retail, led by First Nations Peoples. It is rare for remote supermarkets in mainstream Australia to have nutrition policies and yet these have existed in the remote Australian food sector for decades. Indeed, the Northern Territory government Market Basket Survey (2019) reported 57% of 58 stores surveyed in the Northern Territory to have a nutrition policy.<sup>3</sup> The Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation has had an ALPA Health and Nutrition policy since the 1980s. These unique models of food retail in remote communities that have First Nations Peoples at the helm in decision-making and the health and wellbeing of the community as a business imperative must be protected and strengthened.
- 1.5 We are aware of community leaders expressing their concern about the impact of the current food system on a community’s health and wellbeing. Diet (low in plant foods and high in discretionary foods), is now the lead contributor to the burden of disease globally, even surpassing that of tobacco.<sup>4</sup> Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, stroke, hypertension, kidney disease are disproportionately higher in prevalence for First Nations people living in remote Australia than for other Australians.<sup>5</sup> According to national data collected in 2012-2013, when compared with First Nations Peoples in urban areas, First Nations Peoples in remote areas were, 2.5 times as likely to have signs of chronic kidney disease and twice as likely to have type 2 diabetes.<sup>5</sup>
- 1.6 These diseases, and related conditions such as overweight and obesity, are a human response to a food system that is not in balance with human requirements for health and wellbeing. These conditions did not exist prior to colonization. Addressing this food system imbalance is a global public and planetary health imperative.
- 1.7 The foundation for optimal child growth and wellbeing and prevention of chronic disease is laid down at conception. A solid foundation is dependent on the conditions that enable a mother’s diet to be of quality during gestation and continued diet quality throughout childhood, adolescence and adult life. These conditions will to a large extent determine Australia’s ability to Close the Gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Yet, nutrition has been identified as the gap in the Close the Gap targets.<sup>6</sup> The Implementation Plan for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023 that gives vision for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023, indicates no clear immediate plan for nutrition improvement.<sup>7</sup> It aims to have established a “coordination mechanism to undertake a nutrition framework gap analysis and address identified gaps and issues such as oral health, increasing knowledge and awareness, health literacy of parents, affordability, access, storage capability, food security (pg 12) and to determine the feasibility of developing a National ‘Nutritional Risk’ Scheme for at-risk mothers, infants and children (pg 16). These were to be implemented by 2018 with identified actions implemented and reviewed by 2023. We are aware of no evidence of these having occurred. The issues being addressed by this government inquiry in to food pricing and food security for remote Indigenous communities exist within a policy vacuum.
- 1.8 Discretionary food and drinks, (food and beverages high in fat, added sugar and/or salt), as has occurred in non-remote supermarkets, have been allowed to proliferate shelves in remote stores over the past two decades. Shelf space dedicated to these product types increased by more than 70% over a decade in the APY Lands.<sup>8</sup> Children are particularly susceptible to marketing of these foods.<sup>9</sup> This is a challenge for many parents in remote communities who want to provide the best diets for their children, as children traditionally have been given the agency to decide when and what they want to eat.<sup>10</sup>

- 1.9 The food retail sector in remote communities in most cases is the primary food source in remote communities.<sup>11,12</sup> This sector therefore contributes significantly to the health and wellbeing of the population.
- 1.10 Successful self-determination food retail models where First Nations Peoples have determined the types of products available in their store and how they are retailed can be drawn on in creating a health-enabling food retail sector in remote communities. For example, the Amata community council instructed the store to remove the top three selling beverages which reduced sales of sugar by 25%.<sup>13</sup> Store directors of Dungalan community have a store policy where discretionary products such as crisps and confectionery are not permitted for sale before 2.30pm (in-store observation made by Brimblecombe in 2018). Many community stores have a policy of not serving school children within school hours. Stores in Laynthapuy homelands have restrictions on the availability of discretionary products in their stores (Personal communication, 2019). A range of pricing policies implemented by stores in remote Australia were also documented by Ferguson et al in 2018, and included discounts on fruits and vegetables, water or other healthy foods; rewards for purchase of foods such as fruit vegetables; price increases on unhealthy options; and subsidy/price increase combinations.<sup>14</sup>



Box 1. Dungalan store policy – an example of food retail self-determination

### We recommend:

- 1.1 Decision on how the retail sector should operate in remote communities be made with and by First Nations Peoples as a policy imperative.
- 1.2 Unique models of food retail in remote communities with First Nations Peoples at the helm in decision-making, be celebrated, strengthened and drawn on to inform the future of the remote food retail sector.
- 1.3 The Australian Government give appropriate policy recognition across all government sectors to food and nutrition as a fundamental building block for the health and cultural survival of First Nations Peoples, and of the nation.

## THE LICENSING AND REGULATION REQUIREMENTS AND ADMINISTRATION OF REMOTE COMMUNITY STORES

- 2.1 The Community Store Licensing regime within the Stronger Futures Northern Territory Act 2012 enables special measures to be taken for the purpose of promoting food security for Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory only.<sup>15</sup> This scheme does not exist in other territories and states. Food security in the Stronger Futures Northern Territory Act 2012 (Part 4) is defined as “a reasonable ongoing level of access to a range of food, drink and grocery items that is **reasonably priced, safe and of sufficient quantity and quality to meet nutritional and related household needs**”. The ‘food security matters’ of Part 4 of the Stronger Futures Northern Territory Act 2012 include: (a), whether the store will provide a satisfactory range of healthy and good quality food, drink or grocery items, (b), whether the store will take reasonable steps to promote good nutrition and healthy products; and (c), whether the store will satisfactorily address other aspects of the store’s operations which may impact on food security.
- 2.2 Division 6 of the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act 2012 provides for assessment of community stores in relation to licensing and monitoring compliance. The Community Store Licensing regime has assessment procedures of food security matters. As we understand, this includes a food and beverage range checklist where stocking of food and beverages considered essential in food retail business in food secure areas is assessed by licensing officers.
- 2.3 As the food security definition also requires that food, drink and grocery items be **reasonably priced**, it is surprising that the food security matters do not explicitly include provision for ensuring **fairly priced food, drink and other essential items such as whitegoods, cooking, cleaning, clothing and hunting equipment (essential hardware)**. We include these non-food items as the price of these items can determine money remaining for essential groceries.
- 2.4 The Community Store Licensing regime has been in place for over a decade, however its impact on food security has not been comprehensively evaluated. An evaluation of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs of the community stores licensing program, by the Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre (2011) reported that overall store licensing had achieved positive effects on access to food, improvements in retail practice, abolition of book-up and improved transparency in financial reporting.<sup>16</sup> Limited impact however was found with regards to governance of stores, and the high cost of food and quality of takeaway food were ongoing concerns expressed by community members. To the best of our knowledge the Community Store Licensing regime has collected data since its inception on food security matters such as the stocking range of food and beverages in licensed stores and yet as reported by the ANAO 2014-2015 Performance Audit on food security in remote Indigenous communities, there has been no consolidation of these data to inform performance and assess regulatory outcomes.<sup>17</sup>
- 2.5 These data are critical to inform performance in the food security matters that the Stronger Futures Northern Territory Act 2012 aims to address. Store owners and First Nations Peoples in communities served by these stores have a right to know, if the food retail service in their community meets licensing requirements, and if the Community Store Licensing regime is achieving its goal, particularly as the Community Store Licensing regime was set up to benefit First Nations Peoples.
- 2.6 A food security matter in the Stronger Futures Northern Territory Act 2012 is whether the store will take reasonable steps to **promote** good nutrition and healthy products. Over the last decade we have worked with First Nations communities and the remote food retail industry and health service to generate empirical evidence on store practice standards **to promote good nutrition and healthy products**. At the end of 2018, we successfully completed a randomized controlled trial [“Healthy Stores 2020”](#) in partnership with the Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation. This trial showed that a 7-point strategy implemented in-store resulted in a **significant reduction in sales of high sugary food and beverages with no adverse impact on gross profit** (manuscript under peer review). Sales of free sugars reduced by 2.8% (the equivalent of 1.8 tonne across the 10 stores over a 12-week period), soft drink sales reduced by 12.6%, healthier beverages increased by 24.2% and there was a near significant reduction in confectionery of 4.2%. The 7-point strategy was designed to restrict (rather than remove) the promotion, display and availability of sugar sweetened beverages, confectionery, sweet biscuits and table sugar whilst allowing for the promotion of healthy food and beverages.<sup>18</sup>
- 2.7 Discretionary food and beverage products in the food retail sector are the products most marketed as they make up the majority of impulse purchases, have a high profit margin, and as mentioned in 1.8, children are particularly susceptible to marketing of these products.<sup>9</sup> These four product types were shown to contribute most (67%) to discretionary energy from food and beverages and 89% to free sugars from an analysis of sales data from 20 remote community stores.<sup>19</sup> The Healthy Stores 2020 trial was conducted with ten intervention and ten control stores. The results of this trial were fed-back face-to-face to store directors in each of the participating communities at the time of their quarterly board meetings. Store directors unanimously agreed to continue the strategy in their stores or put the strategy in place if they had been a control store or had not participated in the study. In these meetings store directors identified other discretionary products they would like to see less of in their stores, for example, banning of energy drinks, restricted availability of iced coffee, more focus on reducing sales of table sugar. On the back of the success of this trial, ALPA has now, with permission of store directors,

converted all their 25 owned and or managed stores to the Healthy Stores 2020 strategy. (Please see the Healthy Stores 2020 infographic on page 14 for more detail on this strategy).

- 2.8 Once the Healthy Stores 2020 strategy was set-up in each of the ALPA stores, store managers reported that the strategy was not difficult to maintain after they adjusted their ordering and stocking routines and trained their staff on these adjustments. Store managers who were interviewed fortnightly during the Healthy Stores 2020 12-week trial reported that regular phone calls to check adherence to the strategy and visits by ALPA area managers and the ALPA nutritionist helped them to stay on track with the strategy. Store directors also helped staff to understand the purpose and importance of the strategy.
- 2.9 We are aware of no other model in the world that has successfully reduced sales of discretionary products through restricting the promotion and display of targeted products. This provides further example of remote communities leading the way in shaping food retail to be health-enabling. Where governments are being slow in regulating marketing of discretionary food and beverages, community leaders have stepped in with their own measures for the health of their People. Such successful models as Healthy Stores 2020 and the Amata community and Dungalán and Laynthapuy Homelands initiatives, need to be celebrated and gleaned from to support other communities to shape their food retail to be health-enabling.
- 2.10 All remote communities can benefit from these models. We have developed an App (called Store Scout) with Menzies School of Health Research to aid the scale of Healthy Stores 2020 across the remote food retail sector.<sup>20,21</sup> The Store Scout App was developed over a number of years through consideration of existing evidence, stakeholder consultation and pilot-testing in six remote stores. The Store Scout App guides the user in undertaking an appraisal of store practice in relation to pricing promotion, promotional activity, placement and shelf space across seven different food and beverage categories. Based on the results of this appraisal, the Store Scout App then provides an overall store healthiness score and indicates a suite of evidence-informed best practice strategies for the store manager/owners to consider for implementation, such as reducing shelf space for confectionery, not displaying confectionery at the counter and in high traffic areas, and reducing the proportion of sugary drinks available. We are supporting a team of public health nutritionists with the Central Australian Health Service to use the Store Scout App with the food retail stores they support. We are also developing a training package with other experts in remote food retail to support public health nutritionists engage with store managers and directors to implement health-enabling best-practice. The Store Scout App is ready to be used across remote communities.
- 2.11 Scale of the Healthy Stores 2020 strategy needs special consideration in communities with a competitive food retail market. The Healthy Stores 2020 strategy had no adverse impact on business outcomes including gross profit. A 6-point modified strategy however was put in place as part of the Healthy Stores 2020 trial in ALPA stores that had food retail competition due to concern of losing sales with the complete strategy. Retailers in communities where there is food retail competition could implement the full 7-point Healthy Stores 2020 strategy if there was an agreement between all retailers within the community region.
- 2.12 Store Committee members, Directors of Boards, retailers and nutrition and store staff in government and non-government departments and academics in North Queensland and the Northern Territory participated in a policy options workshop in October 2019 to build on the evidence of Healthy Stores 2020 and consider further policy action such as price incentives and promotion of healthy food that would be feasible and acceptable to the remote food retail sector.
- 2.13 In the Northern Territory, the Community Store Licensing regime offers a regulatory structure to aid scale of Healthy Stores 2020 and other policy action considered feasible as these provide the store practice standards to **'promote good nutrition and healthy products'** that the regime seeks to address. Use of a regulatory instrument such as the Community Store Licensing regime would provide "the level playing field" that retailers who attended the policy options workshop as described above asked for, to enable health-enabling retail practice change.
- 2.14 A further regulatory instrument to that of the Community Store Licensing regime available to First Nations Peoples that could be used to aid uptake of industry health-enabling best practice standards across food retail in remote communities are lease agreements or contracts between business operators, and Lands Councils or local governments.
- 2.15 Government Environmental Health Officers in States and Territories have responsibility for mandated Food Standards Code, water management, communicable conditions, waste management and safety of built environments etc. If First Nations leaders supported use of regulatory instruments to scale store best-practice standards, the portfolio of environmental health officers could potentially be expanded to have responsibility for the implementation of best-practice standards, in addition to food safety. These health-enabling best-practice standards would serve to protect customers from marketing of discretionary foods and unfair pricing, as these also place populations at health risk.

- 2.16 The Stronger Futures Northern Territory Act 2012 only applies to the Northern Territory and expires in 2022. We therefore propose a “National Benchmarking and Accreditation Scheme” to aid scale of health-enabling best-practice across the Australian remote food retail sector through a non-regulatory approach. The 2009 National Food Security COAG strategy for remote Indigenous communities recommended “a national quality improvement scheme for remote community stores and takeaways to support implementation of national standards for stores and takeaways”.<sup>22</sup> In line with this, a National Benchmarking and Accreditation scheme is considered by many of our colleagues in the remote food retail, business, public health and research sector to be an important next step in supporting best practice in remote food retail.
- 2.17 We outline our proposed National Strong Stores Benchmarking and Accreditation scheme based on the principles of quality improvement (see infographic on following page 13). A strong governance structure with First Nations leadership needs to underpin the scheme. Teams of First Nations Strong Store officers would be trained and supported by public health nutrition practitioners to conduct store appraisals in their communities, using validated appraisal tools such as the Store Scout App, and provide support for stores to reach benchmark criteria through a “Booster” program. An evaluation team would be responsible for monitoring, evaluation and timely reporting of overall performance of stores against benchmark criteria at the store, regional, state/territory and national levels and report to the governing body. Key performance indicators would include the proportion of discretionary food and beverage sales, and fruit and vegetable sales, to total food and beverage spending, by store, region, state/territory etc. There is capacity that can be harnessed and built on to report on these key performance indicators using point-of-sale data.<sup>23,24,25</sup> A potential funder to develop and test the National Strong Stores Benchmarking and Accreditation scheme could be the Aboriginal Benefit Account. Commitment from government would be needed for the National Strong Stores Benchmarking and Accreditation scheme to continue as an ongoing program after testing. The appropriate agency to administer the scheme would need exploration, however we think there is merit in considering the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health sector for this role. The National Indigenous Australian Agency has acquired enormous knowledge of the remote food retail sector through their administration of the Community Store Licensing regime and could play an important role in this scheme.
- 2.18 Through participation in the National Strong Stores Benchmarking and Accreditation scheme, retailers would receive recognition and promotion as a ‘Strong Store’ (i.e., a health promoting business), and potentially win customer loyalty through this. Incentive to participate could be further built into the scheme through eligibility for infrastructure grants and nutrition promotion grants.

# Strong Stores

## National Benchmarking Scheme



**Store Appraisal  
Team**



**Governance  
Group**



**Evaluation  
Team**



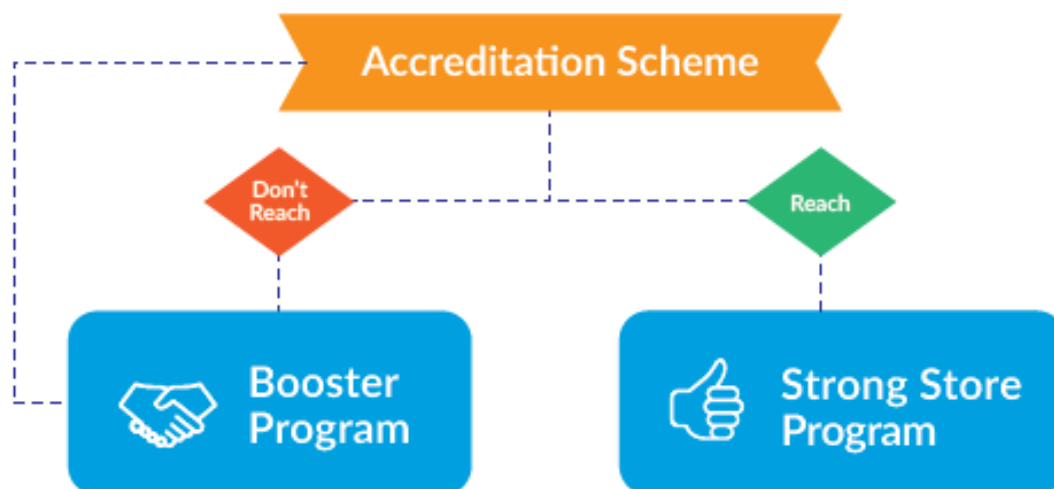
### Scheme Criteria

- ✓ First Nations staff
- ✓ No promotion of junk food
- ✓ Healthy food promotion
- ✓ Fair pricing
- ✓ Healthy quality food stocked



### Tools

- Store Scout App<sup>1</sup>
- Store Scout App
- Price scan on standardised food basket<sup>2</sup>
- Food range checklist<sup>3</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Store Scout App gives a healthy store index based on appraisal of store practices in relation to price parameters, promotional activity (such as displays), placement, and shelf space (proportion of shelf space dedicated to certain product types) across core food and beverage categories. App has been designed to give real-time feedback to food retail business owners and operators.

<sup>2</sup> Use of a hand-held point of sale scanning device to collect in-store price data on a standardised list of food and non-food products and non-food products and related and unrelated electronically e.g., Healthy Food ASB Portal.

<sup>3</sup> Checklist of a range of essential food and non-food products such as the community store checklist. This checklist could be updated to include measures of quality and stocking as per the Northern Territory government Market Basket Survey.

**HEALTHY STORES 2020**

working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities  
**TO REDUCE SUGAR INTAKE**



**LESS SUGAR CAN IMPROVE HEALTH**



**COMMUNITY LEADERS WANT THEIR STORES TO SELL LESS SUGARS**



**THE AVAILABILITY AND DISPLAY OF FOOD AND DRINKS CAN IMPACT WHAT PEOPLE BUY**



**NO PROMOTIONS ON UNHEALTHY FOOD AND DRINKS**



**NO MISLEADING PROMOTIONS**



**NO UNHEALTHY FOOD AND DRINKS IN HIGHLY VISIBLE AREAS (EG COUNTER, END-OF-AISLE)**



**LESS SHELF SPACE FOR TABLE SUGAR, CONFECTIONERY, AND SWEET BISCUITS**



**LESS FRIDGE SPACE FOR SUGARY DRINKS**



**NO SUGARY SOFT DRINK >600ML IN FRIDGES**



**FLOOR STICKERS WARNING OF HOW MUCH SUGAR IN SOFT DRINK**



**SHELF SIGNAGE WARNING OF HIGH SUGAR**



**FLOOR STICKERS PROMOTING WATER AS THE HEALTHIEST CHOICE**

**THE STRATEGY**

**9.5%**  
LESS SUGARS FROM  
CONFECTIONERY  
PURCHASED

**12.5%**  
LESS SUGARS  
FROM  
SOFTDRINK

**RETAILERS HAD  
NO LOSS  
ON PROFIT**

Healthy Stores 2020 shows that changes in how food and drinks are made available and displayed in stores, can make a positive impact on health.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT  
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### We recommend:

- 2.1 The Stronger Futures Northern Territory Act 2012 food security matter (a), include a provision for fairly priced food and non-food items and this be assessed as part of the Community Store Licensing regime.
- 2.2 The Community Store Licensing regime to prioritise the reporting of food retail business performance on the Stronger Futures Policy Act 2012 food security matters to the community in which the business operates, and provide an independent evaluation report on its overall performance to the First Nations community and wider public. This evaluation is critical to inform future policy related to food supply and access for First Nations communities.
- 2.3 The Healthy Stores 2020 strategy, a food retail strategy shown to reduce sales of unhealthy food and not impact business profit, be scaled through a National Benchmarking and Accreditation scheme, and/or through regulatory instruments such as the Community Store Licensing regime and food retail business lease agreements with Lands Councils, and there be dedicated resources including trained personnel to assist store owners, their managers and staff make the conversion to Healthy Stores 2020. ALPA, has the know-how and skills to support the scale of this strategy across remote communities and the Healthy Stores 2020 research collaborative has the skills to evaluate it.
- 2.4 A National Strong Stores Benchmarking and Accreditation scheme be established and adequately resourced to support the remote food retail sector to implement evidence-informed best-practice standards, including the Healthy Stores 2020 strategy and evidence-informed price incentives, to achieve public health and business goals for community health, wellbeing and food security, including the establishment of:
  - A First Nations governance structure for oversight of the scheme,
  - First Nations store appraisal and support teams in the Northern Territory and other states adequately equipped with knowledge, skills and resources to support the food retail sector attain best-practice standards
  - An Evaluation team with access to purpose-built technology designed to report on key best-practice performance indicators including benchmark criteria and sales of key food categories (e.g., discretionary food and beverage spend relative to total food spend), using point-of-sale data securely and appropriately collected from food retail businesses across the remote food retail sector.

## THE GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS FOR REMOTE COMMUNITY STORES

- 3.1 Food retail businesses in Australia operate under different ownership and management structures.<sup>26</sup> This is the same for remote Australia, but as previously stated in 1.3 the food retail sector in remote Australia is unique. Differentiating these structures is key to determining the factors that contribute to food pricing and differences in food pricing models applied to food retail businesses by their operators across remote Australia.
- i. In the Northern Territory for example one ownership model is where the main community store is owned by the community and the community elects a board of directors to govern the store business. The board of directors may then outsource business operations, and employ a business operator (store manager) directly or have a service agreement with a store organisation or company such as Outback Stores Pty Ltd, the Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation, Mai Wiru or the Aboriginal Investment Group to manage the store and/or advise on store operations.
  - ii. A second model is that of the Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation where community members of five communities are shareholders of the six stores in these communities that are owned by ALPA. ALPA directors are elected by members of the five communities.
  - iii. A third model is where food retail businesses in communities are operated by private businesses through lease agreements with a Lands Council on behalf of the respective traditional owners.
  - iv. A fourth model is that which exists in Laynthapuy homelands, North East Arnhem land. Laynthapuy Homelands Aboriginal Corporation supports local stores and shop keepers in homelands and buys supplies directly from the Nhulunbuy supermarket.
  - iv. There are ownership and management structures in Queensland that are different to those in the Northern Territory. For example, the company Community Enterprise Queensland, a Queensland government statutory body, services 22 retail outlets in the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area and five Community Supermarkets on the mainland. The Island and Cape retail enterprises, owned by ALPA, also owns and operates seven stores in Cape York and the Torres Strait Island regions of Queensland. Different ownership and management structures may exist in other states and in the Northern Territory.
- 3.2 These different food retail ownership and management structures apply different food pricing structures depending on a number of different factors including their buying power, freight costs, business overheads, lease costs and management/ service costs which result in differences in food prices across stores. The [NTCOSS 2019 Cost of Living report](#) shows that the cost of a standardised basket of food was 7.5%-11% less in stores in the Katherine, East Arnhem and Alice Springs regions of the Northern Territory managed by a store group such as ALPA and Outback Stores where one would expect there to be greater buying power compared to other business managed/ownership models.<sup>27</sup> Data for this comparison were extracted from Appendix C of the [Northern Government 2017 Market Basket Survey](#).<sup>28</sup>
- 3.3 A further difference between food retail ownership and management models that may impact food price is how the community has determined their store business model. For example, community store directors may set their food pricing policy based on generating profits for the collective benefit of the community, for example to fund sports facilities, equipment and events, community transport and funerals. Store Directors may also set food pricing policy to preference healthy food and disincentivise less healthy food with the health of the community as a primary consideration, as reported by [Ferguson et al.](#)<sup>14</sup>
- 3.4 Store directors and communities need evidence and information to inform store-related business and public health practice and policy decisions.<sup>14,25</sup> Brimblecombe et al found [in a study with four First Nations communities in the Northern Territory and Northern Queensland](#), that quarterly store sales data reports provided to store directors in one community and food interest groups in the other three, on the sales of fruit and vegetable, soft drink and confectionery and the top ten sellers, helped these groups consider where to focus attention and what more the store and community could do to improve the healthiness of food and beverage sales.<sup>25</sup> Changes in the stores made by the store managers as a result of facilitated discussions using the sales reports led to a notable decrease in confectionery and bottled water sales observed in each of the four communities over the study period 2009-2013. All communities requested that the reports be publicly displayed and be made available to the wider community.<sup>25</sup>
- 3.5 Brimblecombe et al have demonstrated sales data to provide an efficient, objective, cost-effective and powerful proxy of dietary quality at the community level and sales data reports to be an important tool to facilitate dialogue on the performance of the local food system.<sup>23,25</sup> Menzies School of Health Research is building on this work and investigating how these reports can be generated within food retail business sales reporting systems to enhance health-enabling best-practice in stores. (Personal communication, Dr Emma McMahon 2020) Information on key food and nutrition indicators is critical for evidence-informed decision-making not only at the store level but also at regional, state/ territory and national levels. National level data on food and nutrition indicators collected through national surveys is important, however these data are collected approximately every ten years, are aggregated at a very high level, and are dependent on self-reported diet recall where healthy food

is prone to be over-reported and unhealthy food under-reported.<sup>29</sup> Timely, reliable and meaningful data are needed to inform ongoing action for improved population diet and health at different decision-making levels from community through to national levels.

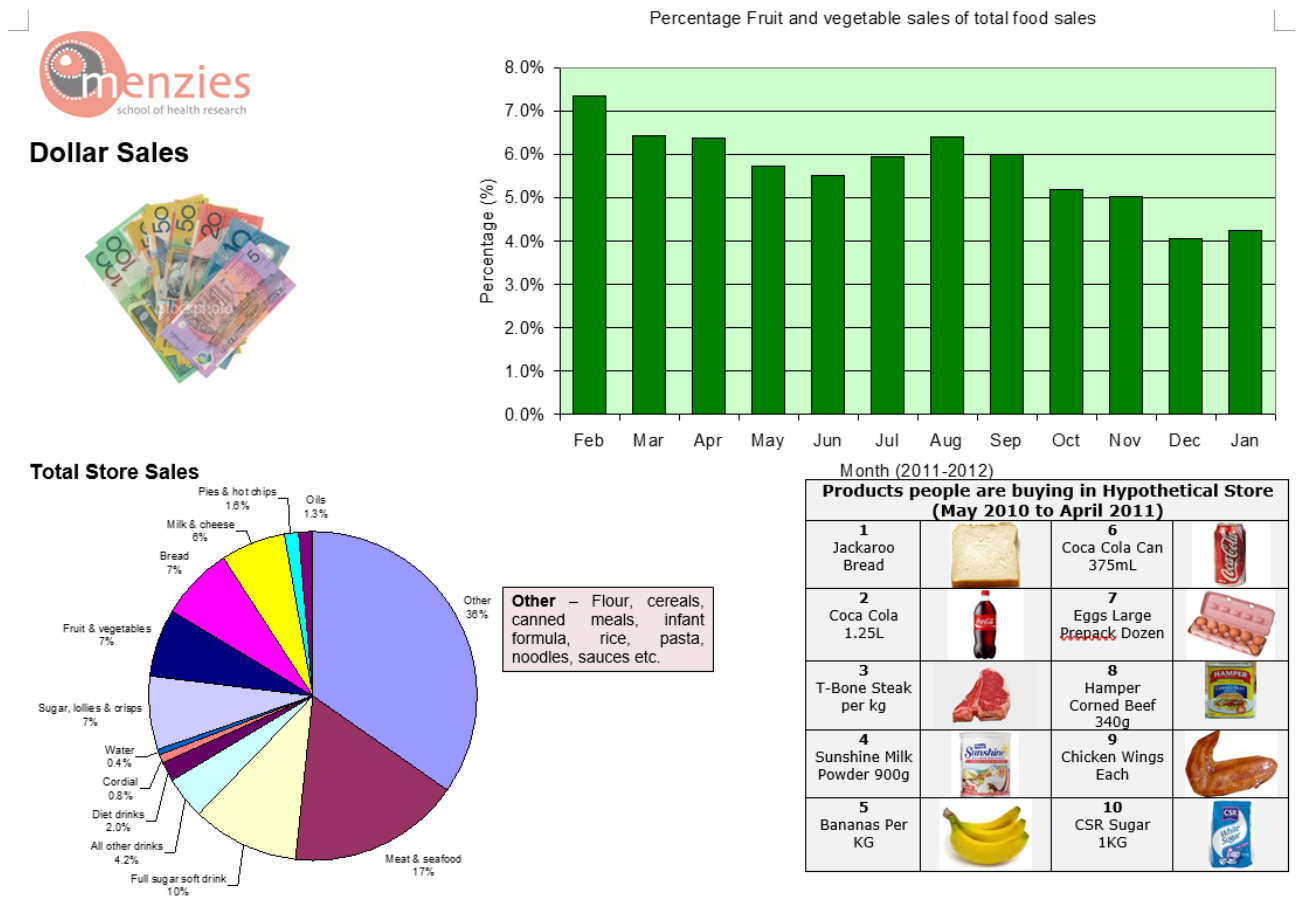


Figure 1. Store sales data report (example of one page from a 4-page report)

### We recommend:

- 3.1 Determinants of food price in the remote food retail sector be investigated using a systems and future-thinking framework to capture the complexity of determinants, their interrelatedness and susceptibility to future shocks (e.g., climate change), and evidence from this be used to determine the most cost-effective, sustainable and feasible policy options available, to enable First Nations Peoples in remote communities achieve Australian Dietary Guidelines.
- 3.2 In partnership with First Nations communities and the remote food retail sector, build on technology that utilizes point-of-sale data to report key food and nutrition indicators, to establish a continuous improvement and monitoring and evaluation system that can inform decision-making at all levels from the food retail business and community level through to local, regional and state/territory and national government levels (see recommendation 2.6)

## COMPARATIVE PRICING IN OTHER NON-INDIGENOUS REMOTE COMMUNITIES AND REGIONAL CENTRES

- 4.1 The Northern Territory is the only jurisdiction in Australia to have conducted annual comparative pricing of a standardized food basket in remote community stores to district supermarkets, and have reported on this to the public since 2000.
- 4.2 In 2019, an average price difference of 56% between remote community stores and District supermarkets and 6% between remote community stores and district corner stores for a standardized basket of food was reported by the Northern Territory Government.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 6: Average cost of the HFB, store type, 2000–2019



Figure 2. Average cost of the HFB, store type, 2000-2019. Source: Northern Territory Government Market Basket Report 2019, page 15

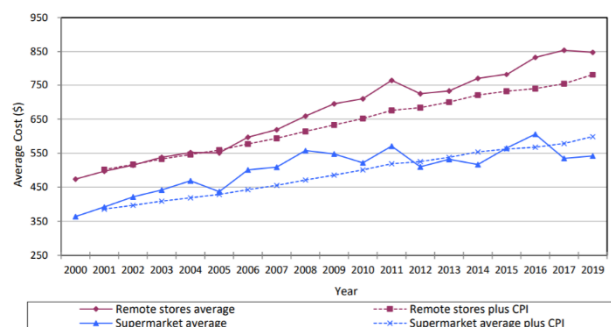


Figure 3. Cost and projected cost of the HFB and annual consumer price index increase, remote stores and district centre supermarkets, 2000-2019. Source: Northern Territory Government Market Basket Report 2019, page 17

- 4.3 Part of this price difference, as shown in Figure 2 is the apparent flattening of the year to year trend in market basket cost from 2008 onwards in district supermarkets compared to a year to year increase in market basket cost in remote communities, as would be expected with inflation. Figure 3 shows the average market basket cost in remote stores to be higher than the projected using the consumer price index. As reported by the Northern Territory government, from 2000 to 2019, the Market Basket cost rose yearly by an average 3.1% in remote stores and 2.1% in district centre supermarkets. The average consumer price index increase over this period was 2.7%.<sup>3</sup> First Nations Peoples in remote communities are not benefiting from the cheaper food prices available to customers in district centers.
- 4.4 Ferguson et al have shown that remote stores can only do so much to fix this price differential.<sup>30</sup> Thirteen percent of the average 60% price differential reported by Ferguson et al using sales data collected from 20 stores in remote Australia and on-line data for two major Darwin supermarkets on 443 food and beverage products, was due to supermarket discounts alone. The average price differential went as high as 106% when private label brand prices were used in the Darwin supermarkets. The price differential for fruit and vegetables compared to packaged products was less. This research demonstrates the impact of buying power on food prices. Remote stores do not have the buying power capacity of Australia's large supermarkets, they are remote and overheads are high. A price differential is inevitable.
- 4.5 Monitoring and reporting of the food price gap between remote and urban food retail sectors is essential to inform policy and to watch over food price in remote communities, particularly as consumers in remote communities may not be empowered to report unreasonable food prices. The Northern Territory government has excelled in remote store food price monitoring. There is room for improvement however in the design, operation and reporting of the Northern Territory Government Market Basket Survey to ensure data accuracy and optimal use of results by retailers, food retail regulators, and policy-makers. An improved food price monitoring and reporting system could be extended across the remote food retail sector nationally as part of the National Strong Stores Benchmarking and Accreditation Scheme, outlined in section 2.17 of this submission. Professor Lee with University of Queensland has developed a tool called Healthy Diets ASAP that could inform the design of this food price monitoring and reporting system.<sup>31</sup>

**We recommend:**

- 4.1 Food price monitoring and reporting be implemented as part of the National Strong Stores Benchmarking and Accreditation scheme, that utilizes point-of-sale data and technology, and a trained First Nations workforce, to:
- collect accurate data on the cost of an evidence-informed standardized food basket, and,
  - provide timely reports on performance of food price relative to food price benchmarks to store owners, communities and state/territory and national governments.

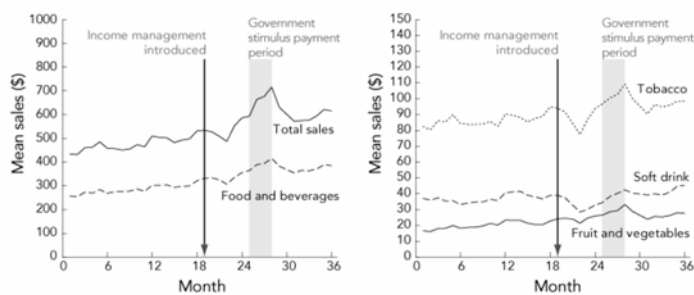
## BARRIERS FACING RESIDENTS IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES FROM HAVING RELIABLE ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE FRESH AND HEALTHY FOOD, GROCERIES AND OTHER ESSENTIAL SUPPLIES

- 5.1 Food is expensive in remote communities and price is a key determinant of diet. Research undertaken with First Nations Peoples living in remote communities has consistently reported food affordability as a key driver of a diet comprising “fill you up” cheap staples and fruit, vegetables and other fresh healthy foods only bought when “have money” on pay week.<sup>32</sup> This same situation has also been reported for First Nations Peoples living in non-remote areas.<sup>33</sup>
- 5.2 These two quotes collected in 2005 through interviews with people in a remote community in Northern Australia capture the impact of food affordability on food and shopping habits, that are still relevant today.
- “Very hard for me to get these foods – because I don’t have money, I only have small rrupia [money]. These are big money in the shop. I only have these [referring to fruit and vegetables] in Darwin or Gove....here, \$100 or \$200 little bit of food. And that is why people only buy flour (Family group discussion, 2005)”.*
- “Long life...if we eat damper, bukma Yolngu [lots of people], eat bread, light one, fills up for longer, stays longer till next day (Family group discussion, 2005). Some families it’s hard because no ngatha, sometimes bitjana [like this] no ngatha [food] and then come to pay week, little bit ngatha [food] damper, sugar, and then coming to pay day week, more ngatha [food] (Elder woman speaking, 2005)”.*
- 5.3 Food affordability matters for people’s health and wellbeing, active participation in livelihoods, and cultural survival. National data collected in 2012-13 show that 31% of First Nations adults in remote Australia surveyed reported to live in a household that experienced food insecurity in the previous 12 months, that is, they lived in a household that ran out of food and did not have money to buy more. This compares to 3.7% for non-Indigenous Australians.<sup>34</sup>
- 5.4 There is evidence that food insecurity in very remote communities is much more widespread than that reported in this national data. In a survey Brimblecombe et al conducted among 148 residents of households randomly selected across five very remote communities in the Northern Territory, 62% reported to experience food insecurity when asked the same question as that asked in the national survey on food security.<sup>35</sup>
- 5.5 In this same survey Brimblecombe et al explored mediators to consuming fruit and vegetables.<sup>35</sup> The majority of respondents believed they could consume more fruit and vegetables, however only twenty-six percent and 19% of the survey participants reported fruit and vegetables respectively to be affordable, 15% reported high self-efficacy to cook and try new vegetables, and only 14% and 20% reported no barriers to consuming more fruit and more vegetables, respectively.
- 5.6 In this same survey, adults who reported to be food secure, have no barriers to consuming more vegetables and/or high self-efficacy to prepare and try new vegetables, also had a higher vegetable intake than adults who reported food insecurity, barriers to consuming more vegetables and/or low self-efficacy to prepare and try new vegetables.<sup>35</sup>
- 5.7 We have concerns that climate change could worsen food insecurity for First Nations Peoples, with flow on impacts on health and wellbeing. Climate change is increasing the frequency, intensity and duration of droughts and other extreme weather events which can lead to declining agricultural productivity and rising food prices.<sup>36</sup> Relatedly, NTCOSS in their March 2020 report, warned of the implications of climate change for household electricity bills in Central Australia particularly due to higher temperatures, as was experienced in 2019, with potential flow on implications for household food budgets.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, there is evidence of more frequent and severe inundation of Islands in the Torres Strait Island region with implications for water and food security.
- 5.8 Research by Brimblecombe et al in 2013 used remote stores’ sales data to model a food spend that met Australian nutrient requirements at minimal cost.<sup>37</sup> A four-times increase was needed in the current spend on eggs, fruit and vegetables, wholegrain cereals, fish and seafood and dairy, and a large reduction (to 10% of current spend) on sugary drinks and refined cereals, such as flour, to meet nearly all nutrient requirements. This modelled diet was found to cost approximately the same but would require additional dollar spend on cooking equipment, electricity for refrigeration and food preparation, safe storage facilities, and much greater time in food preparation. The authors concluded that while there was room for improvement within the current food spend, the Australian recommended diet would cost more than the current food spend.<sup>37</sup>
- 5.9 Cheaper prices lead to increased sales. A randomized controlled trial conducted with ALPA and Outback Stores managed stores and their directors, showed that a 20% price discount applied to fruit, vegetables, water and artificially sweetened softdrink, resulted in a 12% increase in volume of fruit and vegetables purchased that was sustained post price discount.<sup>19</sup> The increase was higher for fruit (20.6%) than vegetables (9.0%). Residents surveyed in five of the 20 participating study communities, reported the price of vegetables, and not fruit however to be more affordable during the time of the price discount. Clearly the price discount

helped customers buy more fruit and vegetables, but other barriers to preparing vegetables intervened to prevent as big an increase in sales as that shown for fruit. Vegetable sales however increased by a further 13.6% and fruit by 2.1% in ten community stores that received a consumer nutrition education strategy with the price discount compared to stores that received the price discount only. This shows the added benefit of nutrition promotional activity with a price discount for helping customers to buy more vegetables.<sup>19</sup>

- 5.10 The 20% price discount gave a leg-up for customers to buy more fruit and vegetables. A 20% discount on fruit and vegetable however cannot address the full price differential between remote stores and non-remote food prices or address the food affordability gap.
- 5.11 Household expenditure data are not available for very remote communities and so evidence on the cost of living for First Nations peoples in remote communities has not existed to inform policy. This was noted by the NTCOSS in their March 2020 Cost of Living report.<sup>27</sup> They reported that residents of the Northern Territory are doing it tough with increased cost of living pressures. Recommendations made by NTCOSS in March 2020 to government to relieve these pressures included – Increased access to renewable energy, extended motor vehicle registration concession to all low-income households, increased Newstart allowance of \$95 per week, increased rent assistance of \$30 per week. This was made prior to when the Covid-19 temporary income relief JobSeeker payment replaced the Newstart Allowance.
- 5.12 Access to more money can help alleviate food insecurity. Evidence indicates that when households in First Nations communities have access to more money, food spending increases including spend on fruit and vegetables.<sup>38</sup> Figure 4 shows the associated increase in total store sales and food and beverage sales with the 2008/09 Government stimulus package as reported in a study published in the Medical Journal of Australia in 2010.<sup>38</sup>

3 Three-month rolling average per capita sales for total store sales, total food and drink sales, fruit and vegetables, soft drink and cigarettes and tobacco, for all Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation stores combined, 1 October 2006 to 30 September 2009



The introduction of income management occurred in one of the study communities at the 19th month, as shown, and commenced in the other nine study communities in the subsequent 3 months.

Figure 4. Impact on sales in association with the 2008/2009 Government Stimulus Package (Economic Security Strategy Payment)

- 5.13 The First Nations food economy exists alongside the introduced food retail sector. This superior model of food provisioning that provides fresh, natural, nutrient-rich and quality food provides a food security safety net for communities, and a model of eating in balance, to maintain health and societal wellbeing.<sup>32,39</sup>
- 5.14 Healthy, nutritious, affordable and safe food must be available to fulfill food needs. We also need the resources, knowledge and skills to access and utilize these foods. The number of First Nations Peoples with food and nutrition tertiary qualifications is increasing. The Nutrition manager of Outback Stores for example is a First Nations Dietitian and Beau Cubillo, an author of this submission is also an Indigenous nutritionist. ALPA has had Good Food People positions among their store staff, responsible for implementation of their Nutrition Policy. There are few positions however for First Nations Food and Nutrition community workers despite First Nations Peoples having expert knowledge on food and nutrition and having successfully passed this knowledge from generation to generation. This expert knowledge is recognized in the forward section of the Australian Government Implementation Plan for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health plan 2013-2023 where the front cover artwork is explained. It points to the plant and animal “bush tucker” motifs illustrated on the front cover with the ancestors “who teach us our culture so we can stay strong today”. It then refers to the illustrated “pathways that lead out from these people represent[ing] the expertise and cultural knowledge and understanding that each individual brings to the table of their family, their community and their people and how the ‘Health Plan’ can best benefit them for a happier, healthier and brighter future together”.
- 5.15 The word nutrition is written 11 times including in two footnote 3 times in the Australian Government Implementation Plan for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health plan 2013-2023. There appears to be recognition of the nutrition expertise that already exists among First Nations Peoples as there

is no strategy to support intergenerational transfer of this knowledge; expertise that is so beautifully illustrated on the front cover of the plan.

- 5.16 There are many lessons that could be gleaned from such a superior model of knowledge transfer to support a local First Nations workforce to be the food and nutrition educators among their Peoples. In December 2019, one of our team (Brimblecombe) with two Yolngu researchers fed-back the findings of a study that had been conducted with the community that reinforced the protective properties of plant foods in reducing inflammation often associated with chronic disease.<sup>40</sup> On hearing these results, members of different community organisations, requested that there be a resource made available to them so they could communicate this story with their families and with others in the community. This illustrates the concern leaders in communities have that people have access to knowledge needed to navigate the food system. A review of nutrition-related interventions with First Nations communities in Australia highlights the importance of involvement and employment of First Nations Peoples to successful program implementation and outcomes.<sup>41</sup>
- 5.17 In Australia, unequal value is given to western food and nutrition knowledge over First Nations food and nutrition knowledge. For example, there are government funded positions and a professionally recognized workforce to support implementation of the Australian National Dietary Guidelines. There is no equivalent paid workforce for the teaching of First Nations food and nutrition knowledge. This knowledge is not only critical for human health but is also intertwined with the health of the ecosystem.
- 5.18 There is a public health nutrition workforce, employed by remote retail organisations and government and non-government organisations, that is expected to support socio-environmental change through the implementation of evidence-based practice to improve the food supply and therefore intake of nutritious food to meet the Australian National Nutrition Guidelines. Work may include supporting the development of nutrition policies and providing evidence-based information to store owners and their managers to inform practice and improving nutritional quality of take-away food and food available through community food services.
- 5.19 This workforce is vital and yet the current workforce is not at capacity to meet the need for improved nutrition at the individual and community level. A targeted capacity building intervention in 2012 reported a total of 19 nutritionists in Queensland and the Northern Territory at the time of the study (13 government, 4 non-government and 2 retail store nutritionists) which was comparatively resource heavy compared to other states.<sup>42</sup> Following, in 2013 the nutrition prevention workforce in Queensland was reduced by 90% due to political and structural reforms. Although the total size of this workforce across Australia currently is unknown there is a shortfall in public health nutrition capacity.
- 5.20 Preliminary findings from research we recently conducted with the Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation to investigate capacity of the public health nutrition workforce to work effectively with remote stores to support improved population health, reveals an inadequately resourced workforce stretched between providing a clinical and public health nutrition service to remote communities. As this workforce sits within a health system tackling a high burden of disease, attending to clinical dietetics often took priority over public health nutrition needs, although the participants recognized that directing resources to public health nutrition had greater potential to achieve health gains.

- 5.21 Supporting the food retail sector to contribute to population nutrition gains is a specialist area that requires additional skills and knowledge to the skillset of a public nutrition practitioner university graduate. These skills and knowledge can be gained through experience and mentoring from more experienced practitioners and training.<sup>42</sup> A group of public health nutrition experts has recently formed to determine an appropriate and sustainable approach to continuous education for practitioners working with the remote food retail sector. This will be modelled on the highly successful community of practice that was led by Monash University with the Menzies School of Health Research in 2015.<sup>42</sup> Monash University with REFRESH (a centre of research excellence in food retail environments for health) is also developing an on-line short course for public health practitioners globally who are engaged with the food retail sector. Consideration of an adequately resourced First Nations and public health workforce to pass on food and nutrition knowledge to future generations and support health-enabling practice in the remote food retail sector will bring about health improvement and contribute to closing the gap in health inequities.

### **We recommend:**

- 5.1 The recommendation of the Australian Council of Social Services to “continue the new JobSeeker payment of \$560 per week until a social security system is put in place that keeps everyone out of poverty” (ACOSS May 25 2020) be considered by the Australian government, together with the cost of living relief recommendations in the March 2020 report of the Northern Territory Council of Social Services, in determining the post Covid-19 social security payment for First Nations Peoples in remote communities.
- 5.2 Based on our Recommendation 3.1, there be consideration by governments with First Nations leaders and retailers to apply cost-effective and feasible policy options to achieve food price equity. We recommend that alongside these policy options, that measures to restrict marketing of unhealthy food and beverages be put in place (such as the Healthy Stores 2020 strategy) to mitigate increased spend on unhealthy food and beverages.
- 5.3 A National First Nations Food & Nutrition program be established to increase healthy food choices and behaviours amongst First Nations peoples and communities. The program could encourage intergenerational transfer of traditional food practices, and be modelled on the highly successful Tackling Indigenous Smoking program. The First Nations Food & Nutrition workforce could also be trained to conduct store appraisals and provide support to stores as per the proposed National Strong Stores Benchmarking and Accreditation scheme recommendation 2.4. This could be modeled on the previous ALPA Good Food program.
- 5.4 There be consideration given by governments for an adequately resourced public health nutrition practitioner workforce linked with the National First Nations Food and Nutrition program to support best-practice standards in the remote food retail sector and other community food services, and the implementation of food and nutrition promotion strategies in the wider community that give equal value to First Nations food and nutrition knowledges as western knowledges and apply a ‘supportive environments’ approach.

## THE AVAILABILITY AND DEMAND FOR LOCALLY PRODUCED FOOD IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES

- 6.1 Traditional food for First Nations peoples in Australia remains an important part of cultural connection, health and wellbeing and livelihoods.<sup>43</sup> An estimated 51% of First Nations peoples aged 15 and above participated in harvesting locally sourced food in the last 12 months, which increases to 76% in remote Australia.<sup>44</sup> In five very remote communities, 89% of 73 adult survey respondents reported to consume 'traditional food' in the last fortnight.<sup>39</sup> The biochemical nutritional health and well being of traditional food has been well documented with traditional food being high in essential fatty acids, micronutrients and high quality protein.<sup>45,46</sup> Traditional food also has significant cultural representation and has been important for the continuation of cultural connectedness and the intergenerational knowledge transfer from one generation to the next.<sup>32,47</sup>
- 6.2 Improving access to locally sustainable and sourced food is essential for food security and an opportunity to contribute to the local economy through multiple revenue streams and employment opportunities for local residents. For example in the remote community of Maningrida a fishing business operates under an Aboriginal Coastal License that provides fresh locally caught fish to the community and employs local community and family members. This is the only business in Maningrida that sells fresh fish directly to the community and is an example of a local business providing traditional food and increasing food security; even during the COVID-19 pandemic the business was able to continue to operate. There are several other traditional food businesses that contribute to the local economy and are ensuring access to land, traditional food, culture and employment. Traditional food provides a role in alleviating food insecurity reported in remote communities.<sup>39</sup>
- 6.3 Stores located in remote communities are in a position to significantly contribute to the sales and purchasing of locally sourced food supply. The stores are often the central distributor of the food supply in remote First Nations communities. If equipped with the right distribution channels and means of storing traditional food safely it could potentially be a viable business opportunity. This could place more emphasis on the purchasing of local food supply with improved employment opportunities. Having access to traditional food will provide residents in remote First Nations communities with improved accessibility to traditional food sources and the option to purchase high quality nutritious food. Formal policy and programmatic support is needed to promote local food production, processing, distribution and consumption within First Nations food economies as well as opportunities to link to the market via sale in community stores. Such approaches must be tailored to unique community contexts and needs and recognize First Nations Peoples food and nutrition knowledge. Such recommendations have been made in past inquiries without adequate follow up by government.

### We recommend:

- 6.1 In partnership with First Nations leaders, the Australian Government act and further build upon existing recommendations from the 2009 House of Representatives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee 'Everybody's Business' report pertaining to locally produced foods, namely:
- Support and fund First Nations-led food, farming and community gardening enterprises for the local production of food and local employment and invest in research into their long-term viability and sustainability (Recommendation 17)
  - Fund research and programs to support First Nations-led enterprises to distribute, process and sell locally grown and harvested food sources (Recommendation 19)
  - Formalise collaborative partnerships between First Nations-led food harvest/production enterprises and the remote food retail sector. Expand operations of stores to also function as market places for First Nations grown and processed produce, with research and development to ensure compliance with food safety regulations. An outcome of this inquiry should be funding for a partnership pilot which requires a remote store enterprise (e.g., ALPA, Outback Stores, and/or Mai Wiru) to purchase an annual minimum of goods produced by First Nations-led food production enterprises. (Recommendation 20).
- 6.2 In partnership with First Nations leaders, the Australian Government fund the routine data collection of First Nations Peoples' traditional food intake through National Nutrition surveys to address the paucity of official statistics.

## THE ROLE OF AUSTRALIA'S FOOD AND GROCERY MANUFACTURERS AND SUPPLIERS IN ENSURING ADEQUATE SUPPLY TO REMOTE COMMUNITIES, INCLUDING:

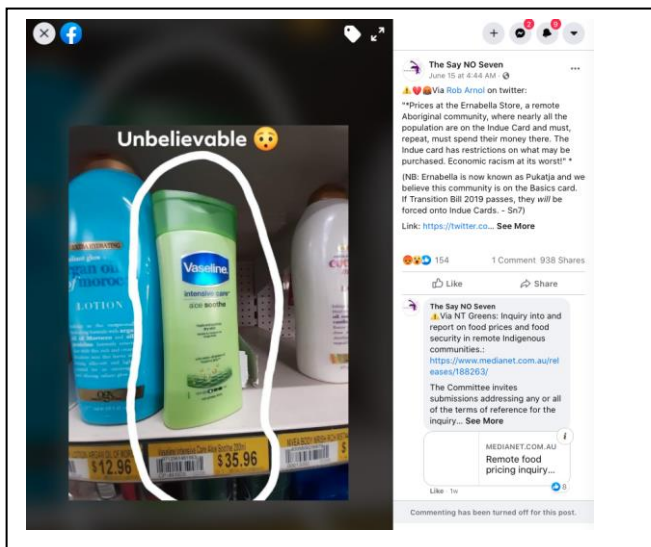
- 7.1 McMahon et al report a positive experience of partnering with a major Australian food industry player, Goodman Fielder, in 2015 to produce and trial the customer acceptability of a 25% reduced sodium Bush Oven bread product.<sup>48</sup> ALPA and Outback Stores also participated in this trial. The trial showed no adverse impact on bread sales for Goodman Fielder. On the back of this success, Goodman Fielder reduced the sodium content of their Bush Oven range and rolled out this formulated product range across remote stores.
- 7.2 The Covid-19 experience has demonstrated the willingness of the larger Australian food retail sector to cooperate with the remote food retail sector to ensure an adequate food supply for remote Australia during a time of unprecedented demand on the food supply in non-remote areas. Support from this sector was operationalised by the National Indigenous Australian Agency through the Supermarket Taskforce.
- 7.3 As described in 4.4, the remote food retail sector does not have the buying power to purchase products from suppliers at the same price as what the large supermarket companies such as Woolworths Supermarkets and Coles Supermarkets can. Ferguson et al with the CEO of ALPA, Mr Alastair King, outlined a role for the food industry in helping to close the price differential between remote stores and urban supermarkets.<sup>49</sup> This could involve Sanitarium providing for example the much-loved breakfast cereal in remote communities at a subsidised price to remote stores and the parent company of Uncle Toby's, Nestle, providing rolled oats at a reduced price.
- 7.4 It is critical that in opening the future of the remote food retail sector to the participation of larger manufacturers, suppliers and food retail companies, that systemic supply issues not be overlooked in favour of emergency food relief, that remote stores do not become a dumping ground for cheap discretionary food and beverages, and that First Nations Peoples be at the front of determining this future.

### **We recommend:**

- 7.1 Food industry be engaged with First Nations leaders and the remote food retail sector to determine how they can most effectively, sustainably, fairly and respectfully contribute to addressing food price inequity in First Nations remote communities (see Recommendations 3.1 and 5.2)

## THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FEDERAL, STATE AND TERRITORY CONSUMER PROTECTION LAWS AND REGULATORS IN:

- 8.1 The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) exists to protect the interests and safety of consumers, and to support fair trading in markets affecting consumers and small business. We question if enough attention has been given to protect the interests and safety of First Nations consumers in remote communities. The food retail market in remote communities is different to that of non-remote Australia. There is not as much competition within the market and so it is important that there be government regulation in areas needed. It is only in recent years for example with Community Store Licensing that display of price-ticketing in the remote food retail sector seems to have improved, where prior to this, customers did not always have information on product prices (Observation by Brimblecombe over many years). Authors of this submission who have family in remote communities are concerned that peoples only avenue to express concern and frustration of unreasonably priced goods is to post on social media. The post shown in Box 1 was brought to the attention of one of our team. The investigation of the effectiveness of federal, state and territory consumer protection laws and regulators with regards to these matters is welcomed.
- 8.2 The Australian Government has been to slow to regulate the marketing and availability of unhealthy food and beverages in the food manufacturing, supply and retail sector and instead opted to support a voluntary interpretive front-of-pack nutrition labelling scheme, the Health Star Rating.<sup>50</sup> In Year 4, of the program in 2018, 30.5 percent of eligible products displayed the system. When unprompted 20.2% of customers were aware of the system and approximately 56% understood its purpose.<sup>51</sup> We are aware of no research that has examined awareness of this system among consumers in remote communities. It is critical that the food literacy needs of customers in remote communities are also taken in to consideration so that customers are equally aware of national systems such as the HSR and understand its purpose and are provided with the same protection as that intended by the government, or alternate resources be made available to ensure food literacy.



Box 1. Social media post showing cost of Vaseline Intensive Care product, June 2020

### We recommend:

- 8.1 The effectiveness of federal, state and territory consumer protection laws and regulators be investigated and strengthened including protection of consumers from unfair pricing and marketing of discretionary food and beverages, and programs be funded to ensure customers can make informed food purchasing decisions at point-of-sale.

## ANY OTHER RELEVANT FACTORS: A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO FOOD SECURITY

- 9.1 Lastly, we bring to the attention of the inquiry panel the Good Food Planning Tool.<sup>52</sup> This tool was developed 2009-2013 with members of four remote communities actively involved in the food supply and with other government and non-government policy makers, food and nutrition practitioners, remote retailers and academics who participated in the Good Food Systems project. The Good Food Planning Tool provides an overview of the key domains of a remote community food system and the areas within each of these domains that need consideration for food security. One of the five domains is food businesses (i.e., the community store and other food businesses within the community). The other four domains that also impact food security such as essential services, health and community food services, local food production and procurement, good governance structures cannot be overlooked.
- 9.2 The definition of food security developed by members of these four communities and other stakeholders at a 2010 Good Food Systems Project indicates the many dimensions of food security:
- “Food security for us is when the food of our ancestors is protected and always there for us and our children. It is when we can easily access and afford the right non-traditional food for a collective health and active life. When we are food secure we can provide, share and fulfill our responsibilities, we can choose good food knowing how to make choices and how to prepare and use it”*
- 9.3 The Good Food Systems project developed a structured continuous improvement systems approach to food security for remote communities.<sup>25</sup> This approach could be built on to further identify with First Nations Peoples how communities can best be supported to determine their ‘whole’ food system and be food secure including consideration of climate, biodiversity and ecosystems more generally. Apunipima Cape York Health Council also provide evidence of a multi-sectoral community-wide approach to tackle the availability of sugary drinks in First Nations communities.<sup>53</sup>
- 9.4 A number of personnel from key government and non-government organisations including the remote food retail sector, Aboriginal Health Services, government policy-makers, and academics have been meeting monthly since February 2020 to plan for a remote stores symposium. This symposium aims to showcase innovative health-enabling policy action in the remote food retail sector and engage First Nations leaders and the remote food retail sector in considering further action to tackle nutrition issues. Covid-19 has impacted the timing of this symposium which was planned for 2020 but has been pushed forward to March 2021. This symposium is timely as it could provide a platform for planning future action based on the recommendations made by this inquiry on food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities.



Box 2. The Good Food Planning Tool.

[https://www.menzies.edu.au/icms\\_docs/188585\\_Good\\_food\\_system\\_tool.pdf](https://www.menzies.edu.au/icms_docs/188585_Good_food_system_tool.pdf)

### **We recommend:**

- 9.1 Food security for First Nations communities in remote Australia be considered within the context of the whole food system, including climate, biodiversity and ecosystems more generally.
- 9.2 Consideration be given by the Australian Government to fund the Remote Stores Symposium planned for March 2021. This symposium provides a platform to engage First Nations leaders and the remote food retail sector in determining the future of the remote food retail sector based on the Government response to this inquiry on food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities.

## PART 2 PAST INQUIRIES AND EVALUATIONS

We bring attention to the inquiry of the government initiatives and reviews in the past decade that have aimed to address food security for First Nations Peoples in remote Australia. We present here:

- i) key findings of the [Auditor-General ANAO report no. 2 2014-2015 Performance Audit on food security in remote Indigenous communities](#) (ANAO 2014-2015)<sup>17</sup> on the National Strategy for Food Security in Remote Indigenous Communities, December 2009
- ii) key findings of the ANAO 2014-2015 Performance audit on food security in remote Indigenous communities on the Community Stores Licensing regime of the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act 2012 and an evaluation of [Community Stores Licensing by FAHCSIA in 2011](#)
- iii) status of recommendations of the [parliamentary inquiry in to remote stores](#) as reported by the ANAO 2014-2015 performance audit on food security in remote Indigenous communities.

We reiterate that reported by the ANAO 2014-2015 performance audit on food security in remote Indigenous communities, that many of the recommendations made in past years to address food security for First Nations Peoples in remote Australia have not been delivered on. We highlight that this is not the first inquiry to examine issues of food pricing and food security in remote Australia, but that failure to deliver on past recommendations by governments brings us to this present inquiry. Failure to deliver on recommendations of this inquiry will prevent opportunity to redress social inequities contributing to the crippling burden of disease experienced by First Nations Peoples living in remote communities in Australia. Measures for accountability of the Australian Government to address food security in First Nations communities in remote Australia must be put in place.

### **National Strategy for Food Security in Remote Indigenous Communities, December 2009<sup>22</sup>**

The [National strategy for food security](#) in remote indigenous communities, December 2009, was a strategy agreed between the Commonwealth of Australia and the States (South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland). The Strategy was to contribute to the Council of Australian Governments' targets for Closing the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage and was a schedule to the National Indigenous Reform Agreement. The Strategy aimed to take a nationally coordinated approach to ensuring food security in remote communities. The Strategy comprised five action areas.

#### **Action 1: Develop National Standards for stores and takeaways servicing remote Indigenous communities**

#### **Action 2: National Quality Improvement Scheme for remote community stores and takeaways to support implementation of National Standards**

#### **Action 3: Incorporation of stores under the CATSI Act**

#### **Action 4: National 'Healthy Eating Action Plan' for remote Indigenous communities**

#### **Action 5: National Workforce Action Plan to improve food security in remote Indigenous communities**

According to The [Auditor-General ANAO Report no. 2 2014-2015 Performance](#) Audit on food security in remote Indigenous communities, only one of the five actions was completed. The ANAO reports:

"The Strategy did not establish a framework to coordinate food security initiatives, and as a consequence, the Australian Government's food security initiatives have operated in isolation from each other and are mostly focused in the Northern Territory. As such, the Strategy's contribution to food security is limited. In view of the expected improvements in general health outcomes that have been linked to improving food security, it would be timely for DPMC to review the current status of the Strategy and provide advice to the Australian Government on options in relation to the actions that are yet to be completed". (pg 14)

### **Community Stores Licensing regime of the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act 2012<sup>15</sup>**

In the Northern Territory, the [Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act 2012](#) (Part 4 – Food Security) provides for a licensing regime for certain community stores operating in the food security area (which is the whole of the Northern Territory other than an area that is prescribed by the rules (see section 74)). The Community Stores Licensing Scheme was originally set up and administered under the Northern Territory Emergency Response Act 2007. It enables special measures to be taken for the purpose of promoting food security for Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. As stated in Part 4 of the Act, it "requires that certain stores (that are an important food source of food, drink or grocery items for an Aboriginal community) operating in 'the food security area' (which is the whole of the Northern Territory other than an area that is prescribed by the rules (see section 74 – Areas that are not in the food security area) are licensed".

Food security is defined in the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act 2012 as "a reasonable ongoing level of access to a range of food, drink and grocery items that is reasonably priced, safe and of sufficient quantity and quality to meet nutritional and related household needs".

The food security matters relating to a community store, are listed as the following in the Act 2012:

- (a) whether the store will provide a satisfactory range of healthy and good quality food, drink or grocery items;
- (b) whether the store will take reasonable steps to promote good nutrition and healthy products;
- (c) whether the store will satisfactorily address other aspects of the store's operations which may impact on food security, including:
  - (i) the quality of the retail management practices of the manager of the store; and
  - (ii) whether the financial practices of the owner and manager of the store support the sustainable operation of the store; and
  - (iii) the character of the owner, manager, employees and other persons involved in the store, including whether any of those persons have a criminal history; and
  - (iv) the store's business structure, governance practices and employment practices; and
  - (v) the environment of the store's premises, the infrastructure of the store's premises and the equipment available at the store's premises.

Division 6 of the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act 2012 provides for assessments of community stores in relation to licensing and monitoring compliance.

The ANAO report 2014-2105 reported that there were 97 stores, out of an anticipated 110 stores, that had been licensed, largely in line with requirements under the SFNT Act. They reported that data collected from compliance checks by store licensing officers such as stock levels and pricing were not being consolidated and used to report on outcomes of the Store Licensing regime.

The ANAO 2014-2015 recommended that the effectiveness of the administration of the Community Stores Licensing Scheme be improved through ensuring the consistency of current store requirements with the Stronger Futures Northern Territory Act 2012 and that there be better capturing, consolidating and using performance information to assess regulatory outcomes.

An evaluation of [the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs evaluation of the community stores licensing program](#), by the Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre (2011)<sup>16</sup> reported that overall store licensing had achieved:

- an overall positive effect on ongoing access to food that is safe and of sufficient quality and quantity to meet household needs
- improvement in retail practices including stock management, storage, shelving, pricing, point of sale and freight management
- abolition of book-up
- improved transparency in financial reporting
- limited impact on good governance of stores
- significant concerns about the high cost of food were raised by community members, and the quality of food sold by takeaways.

No recommendations were made to government.

### **Everybody's Business—Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Community Stores<sup>26</sup>**

[The House of Representatives' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee of the Australian Parliament completed an inquiry into the operation of local community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in 2009](#). As reported by the ANAO 2014-2015, the committee made 33 recommendations to improve the operation of community stores in remote Indigenous communities. No formal response to the Committee's report had been made as at July 2014.

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