

Position Statement FOOD SECURITY FOR CAPE YORK

Food security is a fundamental human right. Apunipima recognises the ongoing importance of traditional food practices to support health, social and emotional wellbeing and strong culture.

Apunipima calls for a strong commitment to address food insecurity and improve nutrition amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Cape York. Addressing the underlying socioeconomic and dietary factors that contribute to the disproportionate burden of ill health experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is imperative to Closing the Gap.

Across Australia, more than 1 in 5 (22%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are reported to live in a food insecure household, compared with less than 1 in 20 (3.7%) amongst non-Indigenous Australians. It is further increased to 31% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reportedly living in food insecure households in remote areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015).

Apunipima Position

Apunipima calls for the following actions as part of a comprehensive approach to address food insecurity and poor nutrition in Cape York and that this approach requires a cross sectoral commitment across all levels of government.

1. Increase access: Immediately address food supply issues in communities that are impacted by the wet season, including completion of sealed roads and arranging proactive emergency food relief.
2. Implement a direct to consumer food subsidy scheme to address financial barriers and increase affordability and access to healthy food and drink in remote areas. The subsidy should be targeted to provide additional support for women, infants and children and the elderly to nurture future generations and protect the most vulnerable.
3. Local decision making: Support community driven decision making to address food insecurity and increase accessibility to healthy food and drink through locally developed food policy and regulation.
4. Increase government investment in a nutrition prevention workforce to implement healthy remote store practices, business and policy.

5. Work across sectors: Mobilise cross-sector efforts to create supportive environments for healthy eating in community based settings such as early childhood education and care, schools, sport and recreation facilities and councils.
6. Engage with appropriate groups such as primary industry, small business development and all levels of government to explore the feasibility of large scale local food production initiatives that have a solid economic foundation and strong business model.
7. Advocate for healthy housing initiatives that increase access to household food preparation and storage infrastructure.

The above actions are relevant as part of the nutrition commitment within the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan Implementation Plan (a nutrition gap analysis and feasibility of a nutrition 'at risk' scheme) and should inform the development of a National Nutrition Policy with a strong focus on addressing food insecurity and social determinants health.

Underpinning all recommendations is a holistic approach, community control over decision making and the need for all initiatives to have a robust monitoring and evaluation system.

Apunipima as the primary health care provider in Cape York believes in providing support to the local leadership in families, community groups and communities to address the issue of food insecurity in a culturally appropriate way that is respectfully on the terms of the community. Also increasing the level of social emotional wellbeing programs through primary health care and community level.

The following statement is a definition of food security developed by members of several remote communities throughout Australia:

“The land and the sea is our food security. It is our right. Food security for us has two parts: Food security is when the food from our ancestors is protected and always there for us and our children. It is also when we can easily access and afford the right non-traditional food for a collective healthy and active life. When we are food secure we can provide, share and fulfil our responsibilities, we can choose good food, knowing how to make choices and how to prepare and use it.”

(Menzies School of Health Research, 2010)

Background to Position Statement FOOD SECURITY FOR CAPE YORK

Food security is a fundamental human right [1]. In the literature ‘food security’ is defined as the ability of individuals, households and communities to obtain adequate, appropriate, nutritious and culturally acceptable food on a regular and reliable basis that supports an active and healthy life [2-5].

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people traditionally acquired a diet that supported community connectedness, good health, cultural and spiritual wellbeing and sustainable land use. However, colonisation has extensively impacted on traditional food practices and health. Generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced displacement from traditional lands, forced reliance on poor quality ‘ration’ foods, limited financial independence and a breakdown of cultural knowledge. The consequences of this are still ongoing, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people faced with higher rates of socioeconomic disadvantage, food insecurity, poor nutrition and chronic disease than non-Indigenous Australians [6, 7].

Poor diet is a leading risk factor for chronic disease [8, 9]. Food insecurity directly impacts on people’s ability to maintain adequate nutrition status to support good health [10]. People experiencing financial difficulty are typically constrained to an energy dense, nutrient poor diet which fuels an ongoing cycle of inadequate nutrition, obesity and chronic disease [11, 12]. Across Australia, more than 1 in 5 (22%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are reported to live in a food insecure household, compared with less than 1 in 20 (3.7%) amongst non-Indigenous Australians. It is further increased to 31% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reportedly living in food insecure households in remote areas. [13].

Apunipima Cape York Health Council provides comprehensive primary health care services to 11 remote Aboriginal communities across Cape York. The remoteness of Cape York presents significant barriers for people to access nutritious foods and consume a diet that supports good health. In addition to increased food insecurity, people living in remote areas experience higher rates of socioeconomic disadvantage and poor health compared to urban areas [7]. Cape York is classified as very remote, where the cost of food is approximately 26% higher [14] and the median income is approximately 30% lower than urban areas [15]. This results in a situation where families are forced to spend a much higher proportion of their total income on food, and is concerning given the level of inadequate real employment opportunities in Cape York. Consumer targeted fiscal strategies have been recommended to improve the affordability of healthy food in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities [16].

Accessibility to healthy food is a major issue in remote Aboriginal communities. Remote stores are confronted with higher freight costs, reduced economies of scale and maintenance issues which impacts on the affordability, availability and quality of fresh food [17, 18]. Additional factors affecting food accessibility include reported issues with overcrowded housing and inadequate household infrastructure that can impact on the safe storage, preparation and consumption of food [19, 20].

Cape York also faces the challenge of food supply being impacted during the wet season, where communities may become inaccessible by road for up to five months of the year. Community garden projects are often seen as the solution to improve food security.

However, these projects frequently fail due to a range of factors including lack of local community ownership, sporadic funding and poorly defined business objectives [21, 22]. In order for local food production to have long term success, a community driven approach with a strong business foundation, real employment and ongoing investment of farming/horticulture expertise is required.

Good nutrition is an essential building block for healthy growth and development. Young children and elderly people within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity and poor nutrition as a result of being dependant on others to acquire food [10]. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Cape York experience poor growth and anaemia at a comparable rate to other parts of remote northern Australia, which is higher than the rest of Australia [23]. Without good nutrition children cannot grow or learn to their full potential.

Nutrition is considered an essential yet under recognised part of closing the gap in health inequalities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people [24].

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