

Inquiry into food prices and food security in remote Indigenous communities



Walgett's only supermarket burnt to the ground 5 June 2019, bringing a food security crisis which has been compounded by Covid19 pandemic shortages. Photo Dharriwaa Elders Group.

A submission to the House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs from
Dharriwaa Elders Group
and
Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service

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IndigenousAffairs.reps@aph.gov.au

This submission is made to the Committee from a small community in remote NSW, but we know that the food security issues that challenge our community are shared by many around Australia. As a small community we have already prioritised this issue and have been making good progress and therefore we think we are well placed to provide advice to the Committee and assist it in developing and implementing a Food Security Strategy.

Addressing food and water insecurity in Australia demands a considered response that privileges an Aboriginal paradigm of health and culture, including the continued connection between people and Country that has existed over many thousands of years.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience a disproportionate burden of chronic disease. A major risk factor is poor nutrition (both under- and over-nutrition), which is being adversely impacted by increasing food and water insecurity. Australian Governments have been advised how to act to improve Food Security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples¹.

The Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service and Dharriwaa Elders Group have long recognised the links between limited access to good nutrition, including safe drinking water and our community's high incidences of chronic disease. Instead of waiting for governments to respond positively to advice offered freely over the last 20 years re issues important to the Walgett community, Dharriwaa Elders Group ("DEG") has built a multi-faculty, holistic, community-led partnership with University of NSW ("UNSW") called Yuwaya Ngarrali² to progress Elders' long held vision for systemic change. 'Yuwaya Ngarrali' aims to improve the wellbeing, social, physical and built environment and life pathways of Aboriginal people in Walgett through collaboration on evidence-based initiatives, research and building local community capabilities and control.

Yuwaya Ngarrali's work for Walgett's food security

In Yuwaya Ngarrali³, DEG established a relationship with Professor Jacqui Webster of The George Institute for Global Health in 2018 with the aim of developing a long term community nutrition project to document the community's food and water access issues, and co-design community-led interventions to improve Walgett's access to good food and water. DEG also approached the UNSW Global Water Institute – led by Professor Greg Leslie and with Dr Martin Andersen. We requested tests of our drinking water and consideration of drinking water infrastructure supports and climate change preparedness planning projects. During this process, the high sodium levels of the drinking water were discovered, and DEG requested the opinion of Jacqui Webster – international sodium in nutrition expert. This was used to advocate for a town Reverse Osmosis system to desalinate the water. The NSW Government has commissioned this, but it is yet to be installed. Until that time, the town relies on buying water from the only supermarket, Walgett IGA, which is unsustainable both in terms of cost and in terms of plastic bottles when there are limited recycling services.

During the height of Walgett's water crisis, residents relied on water donations provided by concerned diaspora, Dignity Water, donations to DEG's Food and Water Fund quickly established for the purpose, and eventually NSW Government deliveries, which DEG and WAMS were

¹ *Joint Policy Statement on: Food Security for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and Supporting document for the Joint Policy Statement on: Food Security for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, Public Health Association of Australia, 2019.

² "vision"

³ <https://www.dharriwaaeldersgroup.org.au/index.php/yuwayangarrali>

responsible for distributing (in the absence of suitable storage and distribution solutions being provided).

WAMS has cultivated a Community Garden which used to provide regular supplies of vegetables to patients experiencing chronic disease and Elders. In 2018 and 2019 the garden became unviable when the rivers were allowed to run dry past Walgett due to mandatory water restrictions and the switch from river water to saline groundwater containing high concentrations of sodium salts. In response DEG worked with YN to test water efficiency irrigation solutions that are compatible with saline water. The success of this collaboration has resulted in a program to install more water-efficient beds, a super productive micro farm, and compost and waste water recycling solutions. Our aim is to produce weather-resilient high quality local fruit and vegetables for households and yet-to-be developed community and school weekly food programs.

DEG believes we are very lucky to benefit from the responses and expertise of UNSW's Global Water Institute during Walgett's water shortages of 2018 and 2019. We were able to progress local solutions, where many other communities can't.

A lot more needs to be done by governments to ensure that Aboriginal communities in NSW are able to exercise their communities' prioritised access to river waters.

Impact of poor management of rivers on Walgett's food security

Because irrigators and miners upstream in the Northern Murray Darling Basin have been allowed to take more water from the Namoi and Barwon Rivers, and inaccurate forecast modelling was allowed to govern extractions, not enough water was reserved to reach the town of Walgett. The rivers were dry for months on end. This meant our gardens, including the WAMS Community garden investment were wiped out. It also meant that one of the most important food sources for our community was lost for months on end – that is the food sourced from the rivers.

The impact of water management on our food supplies cannot be underestimated. Much greater scrutiny by the Commonwealth is required of the implementation of the Murray Darling Basin Plan and its associated Water Resource Plans, to ensure that rivers are maintained well in order to continue to supply food for our communities. Impending decisions about the extraction of groundwater by mining companies near Narrabri, and impacts on Great Artesian Basin and pollution from the proposed Narrabri Coal Seam Gas project, we believe also threaten our town's water and food security.

Food and Water for Life Working Group

The Food and Water for Life Working Group ("F&W4LWG") is convened by the Dharriwaa Elders Group Yuwaya Ngarrali team and supports Dharriwaa Elders Group and Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service to progress Walgett food and water security projects. The Working Group was set up to progress actions developed the day after the Walgett Food Forum⁴ – which on the 8 April 2019 discussed issues of Walgett food and water security and nutrition, and local solutions.

At the Forum we presented information we had gathered with Jacqui Webster's team at The George Institute that compared current Walgett supermarket prices with city supermarket prices. A basic family weekly food shopping basket was priced at \$508 in Walgett, and \$347 in

⁴ <https://www.dharriwaaeldersgroup.org.au/images/downloads/YuwayaNgarra-liFoodForumReport27June.pdf>

Parramatta. We learnt of the current community food traditions based on food availability and rations cooking, the prevalence of hunger and reliance on poor nutrition value takeaway foods.

Walgett's only supermarket burnt down

On the 5 June 2019, Walgett's supermarket burnt to the ground. Again, DEG and WAMS swung into action to support our community's most vulnerable – and raised funds to buy food from nearby Coonamble, while also supporting city volunteer groups⁵ to distribute donated groceries. In the process we learnt more about the vulnerability of our food system, about the challenges of food delivery and disaster responses.

As access to food variety dropped, our community was forced to rely on takeaway foods, and staples of limited choice and nutrition value. Again, water security was threatened (while we were still waiting for the NSW Government to install Walgett's Reverse Osmosis system) and the necessity for water deliveries from other towns returned. Many families turned to driving to neighbouring towns to shop for essentials – increasing the risk of road accidents. Council trialled a bus system and we learnt about the challenge of community transport planning.

Eventually a temporary IGA was established with financial assistance from the NSW Government, where basic supplies are bought. Only the most popular items are stocked by the small store, which reveals the foods most relied upon by families currently. No-one has been measuring the impact on our health and wellbeing of these crises, but we believe they are substantial.

The impact of Covid19 on Walgett's food security

The Covid19 crisis city panic buying led to stock shortages. At the height of the first wave, IGA was only receiving 26% of the stock it was ordering. We again became highly aware of the vulnerability of our current food supplies. DEG was receiving reports of hunger when the school had closed (canteen not accessible) and families could not buy the supplies they needed.

DEG and The George Institute collaborators reported on this in Croakey news:

<https://croakey.org/walgett-community-unites-to-tackle-pandemic-related-food-shortages/>

The following extract from the article highlights some of the food security issues faced:

“Staff member Vanessa Hickey (one of the co-authors of this article) has been taking photos of the shelves each day, for the record. It varies week by week, but there are severe shortages, meaning people aren't getting what they need.

Vanessa was greatly disturbed to hear that three young families she'd visited one morning last week reported running short of food since their kids had been at home during COVID-19. One young mother explained that if she notices she's out of bread, milk, butter when she starts preparing the evening meal – even if she can get a ride into town before the IGA closes – the store is usually out of stock.”

A major concern is that some families usually rely on the meals provided by the school canteen and breakfast programs; now that the children are at home, they are running short of food. The ongoing food and grocery shortages at the Walgett IGA are exacerbating this food insecurity. DEG and WAMS lobbied through our Aboriginal networks and the NSW emergency committees, for food relief. NSWALC, and NSW Centre for Aboriginal Health in partnership with NSW AH&MRC responded by sending grocery box deliveries. A minimal but heartening response.

⁵ FIRE responded, as did eventually Foodbank via the CWA

DEG continued to fundraise and bought fresh fruit and veggies from Qld and delivered them to Elders, along with frozen meals. Australian Unity delivered additional meals to their MyAgedCare clients.

During the height of our drinking water crisis in early January 2019, we lobbied the NSW Government to initiate an emergency response. There was no response, however Mr James McTavish was appointed as the Regional Town Water Supply Coordinator, who we began to talk with regularly.

The Walgett Aboriginal communities' consistent work with Yuwaya Ngarrali collaborators to improve Walgett's drinking water quality and accessibility are made difficult by the lack of public health funds for the purpose, and risk-averse struggling local government.

NSW food security emergency responses do not require inclusion of ACCOs

When the supermarket burnt down, the Local Emergency Operations Controller ("LEOCON") was encouraged by our supporters in NSW Premier and Cabinet to invite Dharriwaa Elders Group and Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service onto the Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC). The new LEOCON was again supported by NSW Premier and Cabinet to invite our organisations on to the Covid19 Local Emergency Management Committee ("LEMC"). We had to be "invited" because our Aboriginal organisations are not prescribed members by the NSW legislative framework established for emergency responses. Our Aboriginal organisations are present in the LEMC at the personal discretion of the LEOCON, usually a senior member of NSW Police. This is concerning for other communities which might not have the capacity and confidence that strong local Aboriginal community controlled organisations ("ACCOs") in Walgett have built over more than 30 years.

During these recent food emergencies, we discovered the limitations of NSW emergency responses to our food crises. It was Dharriwaa Elders Group and Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service that raised the alarms about the food needs of the Walgett community both in the LEMC and to our NSW MP Roy Butler.

We were pleased that food supply issues were raised at the State Emergency Controller (SECON) and higher levels, and that the issue of "just in time" centralised food distribution to our Metcash-supplied supermarket, was recognised as a major vulnerability during disasters.

When Dharriwaa Elders Group raised hunger reports from the community during the Covid19 crisis we discovered that no holistic emergency food responses are currently funded by governments. NSW Dept. Communities and Justice will only support families already under their notice. While the school struggled to maintain contact with children and young people, police were the only agency undertaking other children's welfare checks. We were not surprised when police would report that all children and young people they saw reported no problems, but we were receiving reports that families were short of food. We could not receive funds from any NSW agency to prepare and/or deliver food to vulnerable families who do not want their situation to be noticed by police and child protection agencies. Responses must start from the knowledge that Walgett is a Stolen Generations community.

Food security solutions currently not provided by governments

As described earlier, our Aboriginal organisations were forced to seek food security assistance through the networks we have established OUTSIDE governments. DEG and WAMS have since written to NSW Premier and Cabinet urging them to reduce duplication of emergency efforts by

working to respond to community needs when they are identified by local Aboriginal organisations, and to fund holistic service delivery by ACCOs.

The Walgett F&W4LWG includes people from Walgett IGA, Walgett LALC, Walgett AECG, Walgett Shire Council, Walgett Community College, Aboriginal Environmental Health Unit Health Protection NSW, Mission Australia and DEG's Yuwaya Ngarrali collaborators from The George Institute for Global Health - Jacqui Webster and Janani Shanthosh, and UNSW Global Water Institute - Greg Leslie. Members of the Food and Water for Live Working Group have raised funds from government and other sources to devote to WAMS and DEG's food and water priorities, and the group is progressing work to improve Walgett's food and water security. Our challenges and learnings of recent years have provided us with motivation and knowledge.

Most of Walgett's food security issues are issues for all Australians

Many food security issues impacting on remote Aboriginal communities are relevant to Australia's food security generally. Most of the food security issues Walgett has experienced are brought about by how the Commonwealth:

- fails to respond to nutrition needs of all Australian communities including Aboriginal communities
- has prioritised water away from towns and their food and water priorities, to irrigators and miners
- allows increasing amounts of harmful, highly processed foods to be supplied cheaply to our low socio-economic community
- fails to adequately regulate supermarkets and food manufacturers to uphold nutrition standards by encouraging food reformulation or more effective and informative food labelling which could change the informational environment and shift consumption patterns therefore promoting good health
- encourages food transport and distribution systems that serve our communities poorly
- permits the centralisation of grocery warehouses in cities
- fails to invest in the health values of local food programs and market gardens
- fails to utilise Aboriginal communities existing governance mechanisms for engaging with communities

These are all national issues that are compounded by remoteness, and that can be resolved by the Commonwealth through genuine and effective engagement with Aboriginal communities.

Recommendations.

- 1) We write to urge the Committee to establish a **National Food and Nutrition Strategy** that upholds The Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states “everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food”⁶.
- 2) Governance of the National Food and Nutrition Strategy must prioritise community involvement in food policy and make sure there are mechanisms in place at all stages to ensure community food security priorities are responded to, as this will ensure that community needs are met. Programs must be evaluated by communities, and planning and decision-making shared by communities and government. We know from experience that governments find this difficult – but a good governance structure with good leadership that is well-resourced will serve the Strategy well⁷.
- 3) the National Food and Nutrition Strategy will:
 - a) Work with Councils and state governments to strengthen water and food infrastructure and community disaster preparedness, including to urgently respond to Climate Change
 - b) Ensure state emergency legislative frameworks include and value the services and networks of ACCOs in food and water emergency responses, so that community needs are identified and responded to holistically by ACCOs which are resourced for the purpose
 - c) Change food distribution systems and increase stockpiles of essentials and other measures to strengthen remote community food resilience during emergencies, and increase and improve the availability of healthy food in remote Aboriginal communities at all times
 - d) Subsidise retailers to ensure prices are equivalent across the country and standards relating to prices are regulated
 - e) Introduce subsidies, standards and regulatory regimes that ensure nutrition values are increased in affordable foods offered nationally
 - f) Establish highly nutritious local food supplies resilient to increasing climate and water challenges
 - g) Support community-led local and national nutrition interventions and promotions, including regular free food programs in the schools and community so no-one will be hungry, local food growing initiatives, training for local Aboriginal people in food growing, manufacturing, distribution, nutrition.
 - h) Ensure that all agencies – health, education, justice, employment, industry, environment, transport, infrastructure incorporate supports for food and nutrition priorities
 - i) Ensure the health of rivers and groundwaters are restored, protected and maintained to provide river foods and water for garden networks
 - j) Ensure that Aboriginal communities are able to exercise their communities’ prioritised access to river and ground waters.

⁶ United Nations. Universal Declaration of Human Rights <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>: UN; [cited 2018 5 November].\

⁷ Walgett ACCOs experience with the IRSD COAG National Partnership Agreement has provided us with the capability and knowledge to provide good advice here

In closing, we ask that the Commonwealth supports the already substantial food security efforts of Walgett ACCOs as we work towards improving our community's food security to reduce the burden of chronic disease we currently suffer, and improve our community's wellbeing. A productive local food economy and improved national food system that prioritises public health will additionally provide our town with more local jobs, particularly for Walgett's disabled and long-term unemployed who have not achieved education outcomes equipping them to work in other industries.

Dharriwaa Elders Group, Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service, 15 July 2020.

Contacts:

Wendy Spencer
Project Manager and Yuwaya Ngarrali
Walgett Lead, Dharriwaa Elders Group Inc.
ABN: 26 795 240 948, PO Box 174 Walgett
NSW 2832, P: 0427260044,
E: info@dharrwaaeldersgroup.org.au.
www.dharrwaaeldersgroup.org.au.
@DharriwaaEGroup

Christine Corby OAM
CEO Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service Ltd
ABN: 78 014 990 451, 37 Pitt St, PO Box 396
Walgett NSW 2832, P: (02) 6820 3777,
ChristineC@walgettams.com.au
www.walgettams.com.au @Walgett_AMS