

Indigenous Australians and COVID-19: Highlighting ongoing food security issues

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Abstract

Food insecurity issues in Australia existed before the pandemic commenced. It is well documented that people might experience food insecurity for a range of reasons, including lack of access to adequate nutritious food or difficulty in accessing cooking facilities, and storage, along with income level. Recent research in Australia demonstrates that Indigenous peoples experience food insecurity at a high rate proportionately to non-Indigenous people. The pandemic highlighted these issues and played out in a range of ways through lock downs, along with community and regional travel restrictions and state and territory border restrictions. Indigenous peoples in numerous communities faced food and product shortages, geographic isolation, and price hiking in time of need. During the course of 2020 as the pandemic commenced and was brought under management by governments throughout Australia, Indigenous communities responded to the crisis to protect themselves and to meet their needs. The Indigenous story of responding to the pandemic in Australia sits alongside the broader Australian response as a lesson for all people.

KEYWORDS: FOOD SECURITY, FOOD SOVEREIGNTY, COVID-19, INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA

Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (collectively termed *Indigenous* peoples) have lived on the lands and waters known as Australia for over 65,000 years (Clarkson et al., 2017). During this time, they developed complex and sustainable socio-cultural practices that have endured countless environmental changes over the course of human history. Over 250 languages and 800 dialects were spoken by numerous Indigenous Nations and clans across the continent before the arrival of European peoples in 1788 (AIATSIS, 2021). It is important to understand that in the past, as now, each Nation is sovereign and autonomous with developed holistic knowledge systems that informed and continue to inform interactions with kin, local environments, and surrounding groups.

Many Indigenous peoples today continue to identify with their local affiliations based on place and language but are also connected as a culturally diverse larger Indigenous group with many common understandings and shared lived experiences. Despite misconceptions that most Aboriginal peoples—or those deemed “authentic” or “legitimate”—live in remote or regional settings (Fredericks, 2013), the largest population of Indigenous peoples in Australia reside in urban areas (Biddle, 2018).

European arrival in 1788 had devastating impact on the systems that had sustained Indigenous populations for thousands of years, which ensured a secure and continuing supply of food, water, and resources, as well as its equitable distribution amongst all peoples. There is little doubt that the impact of colonisation is pervasive, widespread and ongoing (Moreton-Robinson, 2020; Smith, 2013;

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Wolfe, 1999, 2006). Despite this, Indigenous peoples throughout Australia continue to resist oppressive governing structures via practicing, reviving, and adapting their cultures in ways that exhibit self-determination and demonstrate unceded sovereignty. It is upon this backdrop that we discuss the state of food security for Indigenous peoples in Australia today.

In this paper, we consider what food security is and highlight its connection with self-determination, sovereignty, and Traditional Knowledge Systems (TKS). We discuss how food insecurity—although affecting Indigenous peoples in different ways—is felt throughout the country in remote, regional, and urban locations. Our focus then turns to how issues pertaining to accessing healthy and affordable food is addressed in three governmental inquiries conducted over the last two decades. We consider how Indigenous peoples have responded to the challenges posed to food supply and access, with specific reference to COVID-19. In our conclusion we emphasize that food insecurity—whilst exacerbated by the pandemic—is not new, and that meaningful systemic reforms are needed to empower and resource Indigenous communities so that they may inform, oversee, and implement effective and culturally appropriate policies, as they did before European arrival (Martin & Mirraoopa, 2003).

How to approach food security in settler-colonial Australia

The effects of colonisation are ongoing (Smith, 2013; Wolfe, 1999, 2006) and have manifested in Australia through disparate outcomes across health, employment, education, poverty, social justice, and other “gaps” (Australian Government, 2020; Dick et al., 2008). Food insecurity for Indigenous peoples is the product of a continuing colonial regime that seeks to explicitly or inadvertently disempower and disadvantage Indigenous populations (Moreton-Robinson, 2004). It is the result of wider systemic inequalities that speak to numerous concerns relating to housing, homelessness, employment, access to land, investment opportunities, industrial relations, race-relations, self-determination, and sovereignty... amongst others. We argue that food insecurity warrants deeper reflection on how Indigenous peoples, cultures, knowledges and agency is valued within decision-making processes in industry, politics, policy-making and social interactions more broadly.

Addressing food insecurity however is not a simple matter of addressing “service delivery” alone. Rather, it speaks to the need for major systemic and structural reform (Fredericks & Bradfield, 2021). The failure to provide equitable and affordable access to healthy food and essential services—particularly during COVID-19—reflects Indigenous peoples’ wider disempowerment and exclusion. Furthermore, food insecurity highlights a governmental neglect to commit to establishing, maintaining, and financing the structural mechanisms needed to empower Indigenous communities so that they may implement culturally appropriate strategies that address social disparities.

Until the continuing power-relations of settler-colonialism are confronted by non-Indigenous peoples and governments, in a meaningful way, white settler populations will continue to reside in what Fanon (1965, p. 39) describes as a “well-fed” “easy going” town that remains blind to the fact that its prosperity is built on the oppression and disregard of others who live in “a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire”.

Mindful of presenting Indigenous communities through a deficit lens, we wish to iterate that the so-called “hungry town” is not the product of Indigenous peoples’ lack of will or capability to prosper, for Indigenous peoples were well-fed with sustainable access to resources for thousands of years prior to European invasion (Angeles, 2005; Browne, Lock et al., 2020). Nor is it the result of Indigenous peoples’ inability to work within an introduced western social system. Indigenous peoples have long remained adaptive and innovative to social and environmental change.

The hungry town where many Indigenous peoples reside remains a “crouching village...on its knees” (Fanon, 1965, p. 39) for it is beholden to the stranglehold of a governing and social system that continuously stunts Indigenous self-determination, innovation, and participation. To address food insecurity, the systemic compartments that contribute to its prevalence must first be identified and its very function reimaged so that Indigenous peoples can control, shape, and reform policies and praxes in ways that are responsive and respectful to Indigenous peoples’ needs and cultures (Browne, Gilmore et al., 2020).

Contextualising food security

Food security refers to the ability to consistently source, produce, purchase and consume healthy foods at affordable prices that ensures nutrition and positive health outcomes for all members of society (Osbourne et al., 2013). The now disbanded Council of Australian Governments defined food security as “the ability of individuals, households and communities to acquire appropriate and nutritious food on a regular and reliable basis using socially acceptable means” (ANAO, 2014, p. 11). The degree to which a person experiences food insecurity is shaped by numerous socio-economic determinants, which often inform and feed into one another (Bowden, 2020). The location and degree of remoteness in which one lives for example can exacerbate the problem. This is further heightened by issues such as poor income; lack of housing, infrastructure, food storage and food preparation facilities; insufficient access to transportation; and negligible management of stores and service delivery, amongst others. While often interpreted as a regional or remote issue, food insecurity is something that affects Indigenous people nationwide, including those living in urban localities (Fredericks, 2013). Temple and Russell (2018) for example observe how English-speaking Indigenous populations in both remote and non-remote Australia often have similar experiences of food insecurity.

Although *food security* serves as an umbrella term, covering the contributing factors that shapes a person’s ability to access and afford healthy foods, for Indigenous populations, security is deeply embedded with issues of *sovereignty* and *self-determination* (Grey & Patel, 2015). Food security is therefore often discussed in terms of *food sovereignty*. Grey and Patel (2015, p. 434) highlight that for Indigenous peoples, food security is embedded in politics of place and time, reflective of “longer struggles against exploitation and colonization”. Like many aspects of settler colonialism and its continuing impact on Indigenous populations, food security remains an under-researched topic with minimal measures of analysis and evaluation (Barber & Jackson, 2017). One explanation for this is that to speak of food security within an Indigenous/ settler-colonial context is to speak of the wider impact of imperialism, unceded Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. This would ultimately require the dominant white colonial power structures to be relinquished in favour of governing structures that are controlled and overseen by Indigenous peoples (Lyons et al., 2021).

Food security for Indigenous peoples requires *sustainable development* where connections to the environment, place, kin and culture are maintained, whilst Indigenous knowledges, innovation and ingenuity are embraced (Markham & Kerins, 2020). Food security necessitates forward thinking that builds the infrastructure and capacity needed to not only safeguard access to healthy foods, but build the framework needed to ensure community control and prosperity well into the future.

Addressing food security additionally means considering how traditional knowledges and practices may be used as means to manage the environment and create additional food sources that supplement diets, improve nutritional intake, cares for Country/land, and creates businesses that may potentially increase Indigenous employment and economic gain. The *bush foods* market, for example, is currently estimated as being worth 20 million dollars, yet only 1% of the industry is represented by Indigenous-led and -run companies (Mitchell & Becker, 2019). This statistic alone signals the exploitation of Indigenous peoples and demonstrates how many are systemically excluded from profiting from their very own cultural knowledge, traditions and intellectual property (Robinson & Raven, 2017).

Indigenous knowledge and frameworks however are not limited to what is often categorised as *traditional* or *cultural* (e.g., *traditional foods*, see Fredericks & Anderson, 2013) but are applicable to wider governance structures pertaining to all sectors of society—from food regulation to housing, social justice, health and education. Indigenous led industries and businesses—which are controlled, overseen and delivered by Indigenous representatives—must be created, and Indigenous people empowered with the resources needed to implement their autonomy and agency. This is the cornerstone of building effective policy. Developing food policy through an Indigenous lens therefore has the potential of creating unique approaches that are long-term, sustainable, and creates additional opportunities in employment and positive outcomes in health.

International law and governing bodies such as the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO Council, 2004) recognise food security as a fundamental human right. Declarations such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) aim to protect this. Davy (2016) however reminds us that a human-rights approach to food security must not lose sight of the fact

that such rights are pre-existing and inherent to Indigenous peoples, regardless of international law. Indigenous peoples' rights, laws, and customs have ensured equitable and sustainable access to foods long before European arrival. Like sovereignty itself, Indigenous peoples have never ceded such rights. In order to address food insecurity, existing Indigenous rights and practices must be acknowledged and incorporated within all policies and dialogues.

Statistics and impact of food insecurity

Food insecurity has wide implications that flows through entire Indigenous populations. A study based in the capital cities of Darwin and Adelaide comparing the price of food baskets in urban and remote stores in the Northern Territory and the state of South Australia found that products from remote locations cost an average of 60% more (Ferguson, O'Dea et al., 2018). While in the state of Queensland, one third of all Indigenous peoples have faced food insecurity at some point in their lives (QAIHC, 2020). Nationally, 20% have run out of food within the last 12 months (QAIHC, 2020). Only 8% of Indigenous people meet the recommended daily intake of vegetables, and 54% eat the recommended amount of fruit (Lee & Ride, 2018).

Studies show that socio-economic factors such as employment, welfare dependency, and the amount of disposable income available primarily drive food insecurity. In 2008, as part of the Australian Government's Close the Gap Initiative, a target ensuring that by 2018, 90% of Indigenous families could access a healthy food basket for no more than 25% of their disposable income was recommended (Dick et al., 2008; Lee & Ride, 2018). This was ultimately rejected by the government (Lee et al., 2009; Lee & Ride, 2018). In many cases, problems relating to the affordability of food is increasing with some Indigenous peoples paying up to 80% of their entire income on food alone. Price differentials in both remote and urban stores have gotten worse over the last four years, despite the issue's increasing exposure (Ferguson, O'Dea et al., 2018). Wider socioeconomic determinants, governmental policies, inferior infrastructure, profiteering, and a systemic failure to listen and respond to the needs of Indigenous communities all impede on Indigenous peoples' capacity to access healthy and affordable food.

Women—single mothers in particular—are often hardest hit, as their limited income is spread to cover numerous costs and expenses for entire households. In a study assessing the determining factors behind food choices in a remote Indigenous community in Northern Australia, Brimblecombe and her colleagues (2014, p. 396) observe how “one participant saw sole female parents as particularly vulnerable to food insecurity because of reduced social networks and limited access to income”. Their study presents a case for the promotion of traditional food practices and cultural sharing as a means to maintain social networks that reflect Indigenous worldviews, and are managed by Indigenous peoples in accordance with their needs and customs. Prioritising Indigenous agency and community engagement in food programs—whether gathering traditional foods on Country/land or establishing community-driven initiatives in urban setting—builds connections that provides a support base that empowers and dignifies participants through establishing a setting in which cultural and social ties are maintained.

Evaluations of food insecurity are often based in regional communities where limited access to food and inflated prices are commonly attributed to a variety of determinants, including freight costs, surcharges, and infrastructure. While these all contribute to the prevalence of food insecurity, “the hungry town” is equally present within urban Australia. Urban food insecurity continues to be an overlooked and under-researched topic. Although not as substantial as in remote locations—where residents may travel hundreds of kilometres to regional centres to source affordable foods from larger supermarket chains (van Barneveld et al., 2020)—issues such as lack of public transportation and access to cars continues to be a problem in urban settings. Browne et al. (2009) note that urban planning and the locations of many supermarkets makes accessing food a difficult and at times costly venture. Housing, overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, and need to share resources are also contributing factors of food insecurity, in both regional and urban settings (Lowell et al., 2018).

Financial strain, unemployment and homelessness all influence Indigenous peoples' ability to access food, as well as the types of food they choose. Processed, pre-packaged, and fast foods are often cheaper and more convenient. One Indigenous parent in an urban setting expressed that she could go to a local food takeaway shop where she could “feed at least five kids for \$20. That's five kids fed. Whereas if I was to prepare a meal it would cost me more to make a meal with the right stuff” (Browne et al., 2009, p. 5). Whilst education about nutrition is an important aspect of addressing

food insecurity, it alone will not reverse negative outcomes pertaining to Indigenous health and the consumption of unhealthy diets (Davy, 2016). In many cases—such as the mother who opts to feed her family at a fast-food chain—choice is driven by financial necessity and not a lack of knowledge of what foods are most nutritious. Investments in education and awareness campaigns alone—which do not work in conjunction with other approaches that address the systemic drivers of food insecurity—have shown little evidence of effectiveness. In essence, government sponsored education campaigns often present an image of responsive government action, whilst at the same time placing blame on Indigenous peoples should it fail.

Reports and Inquiries addressing Food Security

Due to continued activism and campaigning by Indigenous community-controlled health organizations, researchers, and members of the wider community, food security and its impact on the “gaps” plaguing Indigenous communities have received increased attention over the last two decades. This has contributed to the publication of three government-sponsored reports: *Eat Well Australia* (National Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Nutrition Working Party, 2001); *Everybody's Business* (Debus, 2009); and the more recent *Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities* (Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2020).

Spanning over two decades, each enquiry has targeted specific areas. *Eat Well Australia* was tailored towards nutrition and food choices, *Everybody's Business* centred on remote community stores, whilst the recent enquiry into food insecurity arose out of claims of price-gauging in remote community stores during COVID-19. Each report however has consistently exposed the same social determinants and policy limitations that drive food insecurity and have made similar recommendations that seek to empower local Indigenous communities and cut through systemic barriers.

Consistent in all the reports' findings are the need for streamlined national approaches that would create the frameworks necessary to develop, implement, and monitor supply and access to healthy foods. Coordinated responses across all levels of government, communities, and service providers, is commonly cited as a means of addressing the systemic and socioeconomic determinants that drive Indigenous peoples' choices and ability to access and consume healthy foods (see also Rogers et al., 2018). National approaches—such as developing national food and nutrition guidelines—can help define common terms of references and standardize responses in ways that can be monitored and evaluated.

The reports consistently cite the need for greater Indigenous control and participation through capacity building and increasing the Indigenous workforce via governance training, career pathways, increasing the number of Indigenous nutritionists, dietitians and health specialists, broadening access to grants and funding, creating a competitive job market, and ensuring an equitable marketplace through initiatives such as national licensing schemes.

Indigenous steering committees and working groups are envisioned as appropriate bodies to liaison with local communities as they would ultimately oversee the implementation of policy and be accountable to and represented by community members. Such mechanisms however must be long-term, well-resourced, financed, bounded by agreements, and trusted by local community members (see Ferguson, O'Dea et al., 2018). Structural, socioeconomic, and environmental factors such as housing, sanitation and infrastructure are also acknowledged within each report, as are logistical barriers in regards to freight, transportation and the cost of supply.

COVID-19 has presented numerous challenges for Indigenous peoples in terms of food security, highlighting the same social determinants as reported in past enquiries. In some cases, the pandemic has exposed a failure to effectively implement past recommendations (a failure also observed before the pandemic, see Hudson & Hudson, 2010). In others, establishing bodies such as the Food Security Working Group have proven effective in developing and delivering culturally appropriate responses. The pandemic, however, has ultimately highlighted that when provided with the autonomy and resources needed, Indigenous peoples are the most capable of confronting and addressing the challenges they face (Power et al., 2020).

Food Security during COVID-19

Amidst the outbreak of COVID-19, there was genuine concern over the potentially devastating affect the virus could have on Indigenous peoples in Australia and worldwide. In response, governments identified Indigenous communities as “vulnerable populations” whom were “high risk” of succumbing to the spreads of virus. Some governments enacted special measures and restrictions directed towards Indigenous peoples with aim of keeping communities safe. Indigenous populations are tragically aware of how pandemics and introduced diseases—to which they have limited immunity—can have on ethnic groups. Historically, it has eradicated entire language groups, leaving many languages and cultures decimated (Fredericks, Holcombe et al., 2020; Holcombe, 2018). COVID-19 further highlights this threat and, in many cases, such as for Indigenous populations in the USA, Canada and Brazil, it has been Indigenous peoples and other minority groups who disproportionately fall victim to its spread.

In March 2020, Ward and Agostino (2020) noted the need for an immediate response by Indigenous communities, which was promptly answered by Indigenous led community health organizations, local councils, and community leaders. Providing some reassurance, they wrote, “the Aboriginal Community-Controlled Health services sector has mobilised and is leading an advisory group alongside Governments and is meeting regularly to work on a management plan specific to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations” (Ward & Agostino, 2020). Whilst the government spoke of Indigenous peoples’ vulnerabilities, there was an overwhelming sentiment within community that their response would be delayed, unresponsive to local needs, or altogether non-existent. In order to address the imposing threat, action to protect Indigenous communities, particularly elders, had to be immediate and community driven.

In a radio interview for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation the following month (April, 2020), the CEO of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), Pat Turner, spoke of the heightened necessity of securing an adequate supply of healthy foods and essential items for Indigenous communities during the pandemic (Turner, 2020). Access to fresh and nutritious food being vital to boost Indigenous peoples’ immune system, particularly for Elders and within communities where health is already compromised and experiences with food insecurity prevalent (Temple & Russell, 2018). Diet is a signification determinant of one’s susceptibility to disease (Brimblecombe et al., 2018). Turner expressed her disappointment of the government’s neglect to take preventative action to address issues concerning healthcare and food access, stating in the broadcast that “the pre-planning wasn’t done to ensure ready access to healthy and affordable food... Our people need access to fresh produce and they need, now more than ever, healthy food to keep their immunity system up” (Turner, 2020, 13:48)

COVID-19 merely exacerbated a pre-existing issue (Kent et al., 2020) and exposed a wider neglect and failure of governmental accountability in delivering basic human rights (Davy, 2016). It has been driven by what Bowden (2020) describes as *transitory* short-term shocks, such as environmental factors and the unforeseen circumstances associated with the pandemic as well as *chronic* shocks, such as socioeconomic determinants including income, housing, or poverty.

The establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19 provided an essential mechanism that facilitated communication between communities and governments. Whilst an effective tool to navigate and direct governmental policy and responses to where it was most needed, the advisory group were simply reiterating pre-existing problems pertaining to the supply and distribution of essential items and services that had already been brought to the government’s attention.

Alongside preventative measures such as community lockdowns, restrictions on movements, and border closures, came numerous pressures on community services, which significantly affected food delivery and supply chains (Power et al., 2020). Upon announcement of community lockdowns, many Indigenous peoples from regional and urban areas returned to their remote home communities, adding additional strain on services that are already underfunded, under-resourced and operationally fragile. NACCHO estimates that demand on local stores increased by 20 to 30% during the pandemic.

An influx of additional bodies would have also impacted overcrowding (Chenhall & Senior, 2018)—something that already affects 53% of Indigenous households in the Northern Territory alone. This, alongside increased demand on electricity and inadequate infrastructure can potentially inform what

foods residents consume. As many houses have inadequate food preparation facilities, or electricity to power essential items such as refrigerators, people may be more inclined to opt for unhealthy takeaway or prepacked foods (Bryce et al., 2020). Only 6% of houses in Indigenous communities in Queensland have the entire recommended infrastructure and utensils for safe food storage and preparation (Lee & Ride, 2018); 20% of houses in very remote Northern Territory have no food preparation facilities at all.

Peoples' return to Country/land in remote and regional communities however has had some positive physical and mental health outcomes. Anthropologist Jon Altman amongst others (Altman, 2020; Moodie et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020) have noted how being on Country has provided opportunities to source traditional foods, which has resulted in maintaining relational and cultural ties to kin and the land. In addition to this, traditional foods have numerous nutritional benefits, often being high in fibre, protein, polyunsaturated fat and slowly digestible carbohydrates (Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet, 2020; Ferguson et al., 2017; Lee & Ride, 2018).

Foods, sourced through fishing, hunting, and gathering, are often used to supplement Indigenous peoples' diets, particularly in remote locations (Bowden, 2020). Although they are unlikely to form the entirety of a person's diet, they nonetheless remain a necessary component of Indigenous cultural identity and provides an additional food source that can alleviate some financial burden and provide cultural and economic opportunities (Angeles, 2005). Brimblecombe (Brimblecombe et al., 2014) and her colleagues highlight how integrating understandings of traditional food systems with the contemporary food environment is an effective way of educating Indigenous populations on nutrition, as it situates the conversation within a specifically Indigenous context. Additionally, it offers solutions that are culturally appropriate and relevant to local settings (Cubillo et al., 2020; Ferguson, O'Dea et al., 2018).

Despite the benefits of sourcing and consuming traditional foods, its practice does not negate the reality that Indigenous peoples' access to food remains reliant on the supply chains formed by community stores and service providers. A range of factors drastically affected such supply chains during COVID-19. The prevalence of panic buying in urban areas and general awareness of the fragility of supply chains provoked some communities to implement ad hoc responses in preparation for worst-case scenarios. The Cape York shire for example converted their visitor accommodation centre into a space that could act as both an additional hospital ward and storage facility to stockpile food (Shoebridge, 2020). Panic buying highlighted a disconnect between remote areas and urban/regional centres where hoarding and mass purchasing of essential items caused major disruptions to supply chains (Smith, 2020). In response, major supermarkets imposed purchase limits to ensure equitable distribution of food. While such restrictions were an effective measure to prevent mass purchases, it had a significant unforeseen consequence for those living in remote communities.

Due to the inflated price of food in remote community stores, residents can travel hundreds of kilometres to the nearest regional supermarket in order to stockpile food to last several weeks or months (Fredericks, Bargallie et al., 2020; van Barneveld et al., 2020). Purchase limits due to panic buying and restrictions on movement due to lockdowns prevented this from happening. The inability to access and purchase cheaper food in large quantities not only created greater financial burden on consumers, but also generated greater demand on what is often the only store serving a community (Power et al., 2020). Community stores therefore had to face both the added pressures associated with COVID-19, as well as the barriers and challenges faced on a daily basis.

Food security therefore is beholden to a range of environmental and circumstantial events that informs the availability and affordability of food (Bowden, 2020). This was particularly the case for the community of Walgett in New South Wales whose only supermarket burnt down in 2019 (Furlong & McCutcheon, 2020). Whilst a temporary replacement store was set up, its smaller size and constraints on supply chains meant that only 26% of its ordered stock was received during the pandemic. This was a common occurrence throughout the pandemic. The community store on Mornington Island (Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2020, p. 59) for example posted a sign informing its customers that:

Due to the coronavirus many items in the shop are temporary not available. That means that when we do an order [half] of what we order does not come in on the barge. This will continue until the end of June. We will do what we can to get as much as we can for the community.

The situation in Walgett worsened when a prolonged drought caused salt to leach into the drinking water supply, placing further demand on bottled water, a popular item amongst panic buyers in populated areas (Furlong & McCutcheon, 2020).

Panic buying, reactionary responses by supermarkets to impose purchase limits, and the Australian government's decision to lockdown communities without adequate Indigenous consultation all signify breaks in communication and highlight a disconnect between policy makers and local communities. Failing to communicate with Indigenous communities and representative organizations meant that many were caught off guard and were therefore under-resourced in making the preparations needed to respond to the lockdowns and mitigate some of the consequences of doing so. For example, the local council in Davenport, South Australia, was given little notice and were still making arrangements to ensure sufficient supply of food when restrictions on movement were announced (Marie et al., 2020). The CEO of the community council, Lavene Ngatokorua, spoke of how mechanisms for the supply of food and essential services needed to be in place before lockdowns were imposed and that they found themselves in a position where they had to make urgent negotiations with major supermarkets to ensure their community had access to food (Marie et al., 2020).

Other communities such as Wilcannia, New South Wales, called for greater police support to enforce lockdown measures (Marie et al., 2020). Anxieties about travellers passing through the region stemmed from both fear that the virus would spread as well as out of concern that travellers would purchase food that was already in limited supply. The community of Cherbourg in the state of Queensland, like many other communities, quickly mobilised to set up checkpoints to monitor and restrict movement, whilst the local council imposed special measures to ensure that food was delivered, accessible, and affordable to residents (southburnett.com.au, 2020). All however did not support lockdowns and roadblocks. In April 2020, in Davenport, South Australia, Adnyamathanha Elder Malcolm McKenzie was arrested after protesting lockdown restrictions and the requirement that residents attain a permit to enter or exit their community (Lysaght, 2020).

It must be acknowledged that Australia's dehumanising protectionist laws of past, which controlled all aspects of Indigenous peoples' lives (Wilson, 1997)—segregating populations along lines of race, restricting their movements, treating Indigenous peoples as dependent wards of the state, and effectively turning missions into prisons—remains in the living memory of many Indigenous peoples today. Punitive implementation of restrictions without following the correct culturally appropriate protocols has the potential of provoking deep seeded intergenerational trauma (Atkinson, 2002). As Atkinson (2002, p. 66) highlights “the name and function of ‘protector’ by the state is itself another form of abuse”. Such a history cannot be ignored when policies that enact restrictions on movement and necessitates permits are justified as acts of “protection”.

Some residents of Davenport likened community lockdown to the mission days. Our concern here lies not in the debate over whether community lockdowns are necessary, but rather in the lack of communication and coordination between different sectors of the government, public officials, police force, and their consideration of communities' wishes and concerns. Whilst advisory groups such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19 are effective in terms of guiding national discourses pertaining to federal policy, mechanisms that ensure local communities are consulted and included in decision-making processes, on a grass roots level, must be strengthened (Browne, Gilmore et al., 2020).

Throughout the pandemic philanthropic endeavours led by community-organizations and large chain supermarkets ensured that communities had some continued access to food during lockdowns. Various initiatives saw food donated, food vouchers distributed, and emergency measures implemented to ensure supply chains remained open (Smith et al., 2020). Although alleviating some of the pressures associated with food insecurity, the degree to which such initiatives were successful varied from location to location.

Philanthropy alone however cannot address the underlying issues that drive food insecurity (O'Kane, 2020). Where some communities were able to negotiate agreements with larger supermarkets, others struggled. While we welcome such measures, in order to make lasting systemic change, support must be ongoing and built into frameworks and agreements that empower local communities in ways that enable them to source and distribute food at affordable prices and in accordance to the community's needs.

COVID-19 has demonstrated to industry that both they and Indigenous representative bodies are capable of entering partnerships and sharing resources for mutual benefit and common interest. One major supermarket for example came to the realization during the pandemic that they have “the framework and the capacity to be able to work directly to supply retailers and support remote communities” (Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2020, p. 26). Through sharing their supply chains, remote community stores may potentially gain access to cheaper foods via larger companies, who may take on a role as distributors. In some cases, community stores are already forced to purchase goods from larger supermarkets to meet community demand but do so at retail prices. Sharing pre-existing distribution centres and establishing new ones in regional locations may provide greater access to stock, whilst also reducing logistical expenses like freight.

Many have documented the systemic disadvantages that smaller community stores face when having to navigate complex contracts with wholesale providers (Brimblecombe et al., 2017; Ferguson, O’Dea et al., 2018). In some cases, community stores are unable to compete or gain access to the resources, concessions, and subsidies offered to larger competitors. One factor driving the exorbitant cost of food in remote locations is local store’s inability to purchase cheaper generic brands or buy products in bulk. Entering into partnerships with large supermarket chains who can grant remote stores access to their suppliers and distribution networks—could potentially lead to the purchase of cheaper goods and sharing of resources.

Conclusion—A hunger for reform

In the opening of the paper we referred to Frantz Fanon’s (1965) depiction of the “well-fed” settler town. A town built on the exploitation and dehumanization of Indigenous peoples, who conversely occupy a “hungry town”, “starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, or light” (Fanon, 1965, p. 39). The hunger that Fanon speaks of is both literal and figurative. It is a literal hunger, as Indigenous peoples are disproportionately affected by food insecurity informed and maintained by numerous socio-economic determinants and ongoing systemic failings to produce effective and responsive food policy. The hunger however is also figurative. Indigenous communities, organizations, representative bodies, and activists continue to demonstrate their tenacity and endurance in demanding self-determination, enacting sovereignty, and placing increasing pressure on governments to ensure their greater participation in decision-making processes. This form of hunger will never subside.

Throughout this paper, we have given an overview of the prevalence of food insecurity for Indigenous peoples in Australia. Although COVID-19 has exacerbated many issues relating to securing and accessing an affordable and healthy food basket, it has merely exposed a pre-existing problem that has been known for a long time. Our analysis of the three government inquiries that have investigated food security has highlighted how awareness of the issue, and the actions deemed necessary to address it, are well documented. Recommendations pertaining to monitoring and evaluating food pricing; addressing freight costs; promoting greater competition; improving infrastructure, housing and utility services; addressing overcrowding; building capability and increasing the Indigenous workforce; improving knowledge of nutrition, amongst others, are consistently documented in all reports. This is acknowledged in the latest 2020 inquiry that conveys its regret at having to conduct yet another report.

The consistent inability to adequately implement the recommendations made and effectively address ongoing concerns relating to food security, points to a systemic failing where communication and the transference of knowledge and resources between local communities, service providers, and governments often breaks down. COVID-19 exposed such breaks in communication but also highlighted local communities’ capability to quickly mobilise and identify what actions are needed to keep communities safe. Indigenous representative bodies such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19, the coalition of the peaks, and numerous community-controlled services, continue to demonstrate Indigenous peoples’ capability in leading community-driven responses to ongoing crises. COVID-19 has further highlighted this.

The problem therefore lies not in a lack of awareness of the prevalence of food insecurity but rather in the absence of structural mechanisms that would translate the actions and responses Indigenous peoples deem necessary into policy. In their submission to the latest government inquiry, NACCHO (2020, p. 22) expressed that “we are concerned that we continue to receive anecdotal reports of price increases in remote communities”. NACCHO is calling for greater monitoring, evaluation, sharing of data, but most importantly greater accountability and structural change.

Indigenous led reforms such as those proposed by the Uluru Statement from the Heart, State Treaties, and other inquiries like the Queensland Productivity Commission's investigation into service delivery, all propose new ways of navigating policy and decision-making processes. Unanimously, Indigenous peoples are demanding greater participation within the very socio-political structures that govern their lives. Calls for the Australian Government to support the Uluru Statement from the Heart (Davis, 2018; Fredericks & Bradfield, 2020) and an Indigenous Voice to Parliament (Davis, 2020; Fredericks & Bradfield, 2020) would provide a mechanism that allows Indigenous peoples to present advice and guidance that is both rooted in lived experience and translatable to national strategies (Browne, Gilmore et al., 2020). This is essential to effectively address the numerous socio-political determinates that drive food insecurity in a culturally appropriate and holistic manner.

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