



Submission

Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria



The peak representative for the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Victoria.

**Victorian Aboriginal Community
Controlled Health Organisation**

17-23 Sackville Street, PO Box 1328, Collingwood VIC 3066
T: 03 9411 9411 F: 03 9411 9411 E: enquiries@vaccho.org.au
www.vaccho.org.au ABN: 67 498 114 972 RTO: 20739

Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	2
Acknowledgment of Country.....	3
About us.....	3
Note on Language.....	3
Executive Summary.....	4
Recommendations.....	5
Response to Terms of Reference.....	6
Conclusion.....	8

Acknowledgment of Country

VACCHO respectfully acknowledges that our office is based on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. We pay our respects to Wurundjeri ancestors and caretakers of this land, and to Elders both past and present. We extend our respect to all Traditional Owners and Elders across the lands on which we and our Members work and acknowledge their everlasting connection to Country, Culture, and Community. Always was, always will be, Aboriginal land.

About us

The Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) was established in 1996. VACCHO is the peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing body representing 33 Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in Victoria. The role of VACCHO is to build the capacity of its Membership and to advocate for issues on their behalf.

Capacity is built amongst Members through strengthening support networks, increasing workforce development opportunities and through leadership on health and wellbeing. Advocacy is carried out with a range of private, community and government agencies, at state and national levels, on all issues related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

Nationally, VACCHO represents the Community-controlled health and wellbeing sector through its affiliation and membership on the board of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO). State and Federal Governments formally recognise VACCHO as Victoria's peak representative organisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. VACCHO's vision is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will have a high quality of health and wellbeing, enabling individuals and communities to reach their full potential in life. This will be achieved through the process of Community control.

Note on Language

The term Aboriginal includes all Aboriginal people living in Victoria. The terms 'Community' or 'Communities' in this document refers to all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia, representing a wide diversity of cultures, traditions, and experiences. Community is always capitalised unless it has the word Aboriginal in front of it or if it's referencing a non-Aboriginal community.

Executive Summary

Urgent action is needed to address growing food insecurity in Victorian Aboriginal Communities. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) are already at the forefront of responding to the growing number of factors driving food insecurity in our Communities.

We need comprehensive and coordinated support from the Victorian Government to maintain and strengthen our response to growing food insecurity within Victorian Aboriginal Communities.

Over the past 4 years, our Communities have faced unprecedented pressure and stress, resulting from:

Socio-Economic Stress:

- The socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Major percentage increases in Living Cost Indexes and the Consumer Price Index.
- Slow or low growth in real wages.
- Ongoing chronic shortage of secure and affordable housing, and protracted waitlists for access to social housing.

Environmental Stress:

- The 2019–20 “Black Summer” bushfires.
- The 2022 flood emergency across Northern Victoria.

As a result, many Aboriginal families across Victoria live at, or near, poverty line estimates, at the intersection of relatively low income, precarious housing, and food insecurity. Despite aspiring to self-determination and economic independence, many of our families are disadvantaged by macro and structural forces in socio-economic policy landscapes, which reproduce cycles of poverty and unmet need.

This lived and living experience exists alongside the reality of racism in Australia and is compounded by intergenerational trauma rooted in the historic injustices of colonisation. For many families, the food insecurity we face today is a consequence of the intentional disruption of the continuity of Aboriginal cultural and family life, which took place throughout colonisation, destroying long-standing food knowledges and traditions in our Communities.

This submission provides an overview of the factors contributing to food insecurity and their impact on Aboriginal communities and provides recommendations for priority action.

Recommendations

VACCHO recommends that the Victorian Government commit to providing dedicated, reliable and consistent funding for the following Aboriginal Community-led initiatives:

1. **ACCOs are resourced to operate self-determined food security and nutrition initiatives within their Communities, for example:**
 - a. Food and cooking education programs for Community members of all ages.
 - b. Community food sharing initiatives.
 - c. Provision of food relief to families with unmet nutritional needs, ensuring that food provided is familiar, healthy, and dignified.
2. **ACCOs are resourced to establish and maintain on-country Community Gardens, enabling them to:**
 - a. Grow and share fresh and healthy food within Communities, at scale.
 - b. Operate on-country food education initiatives.
 - c. Empower Aboriginal Elders to revive and share knowledge about traditional food growing and food-related cultural practices.
3. **ACCOs are resourced to operate Aboriginal-led Early Parenting programs, including:**
 - a. Strengths-based approaches to supporting the development of parenting skills and confidence, incorporating nutrition education and knowledge of cooking healthy meals.
 - b. Strengths-based approaches to supporting antenatal and perinatal nutrition for women and young families, including increased access to breastfeeding support and the provision of food relief where needed.

These priority actions were identified through community-based Aboriginal-led research undertaken by VACCHO in partnership with Deakin University over 2021–23, through which six Victorian Aboriginal Communities participated in workshops to map their food environments and the factors influencing decisions in relation to food. This research resulted in the publication of the *Food Policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (FoodPATH) Community Report*.¹

These priority actions are recommended in addition to the Victorian Government's underlying commitment to building opportunity and economic prosperity in all Victorian Aboriginal Communities, as measured against the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework (VAAF) and reported in the Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report (VGAAR).

¹ Browne J, Walker T, Hill, K, Brown A, Mitchell F, Thow, S, Ryan J, Beswick H et al., (2023), *Food policies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (FoodPATH): Community Report*, Deakin University and Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Collingwood, Victoria.

Response to Terms of Reference

1.A. The impact of food insecurity in Victorian Aboriginal Communities on physical and mental health

1.B. The impact of food insecurity in Victorian Aboriginal Communities on poverty and hardship

- In every FoodPATH Community Workshop, poverty, hardship, and food insecurity were inextricably connected. These were all identified as major concerns, and were associated with higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression.
- This is reflected in the stories shared in the *Balit Durn Durn* report that VACCHO published in 2020 in response to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. *Balit Durn Durn* outlined clearly how experiences of psychological distress and anxiety frequently stem from the chronic stress caused by a combination of poverty, hardship and food insecurity.²
- In every FoodPATH Community Workshop, inadequate access to healthy foods was identified as a key concern. When families are unable to afford or access healthy foods, it is more likely that cheaper, less nutritious foods, usually high in salt, sugar and unhealthy fats, are considered the only viable options available to them. As a result, healthy foods are excluded from food purchasing patterns, leading to poorer longer-term health outcomes.
- The cost of living and higher cost of nutritious foods, imposes an additional financial burden on already struggling households. This often results in difficult trade-offs between food and other essential expenses, such as housing, healthcare and education.
- Workshops also identified that health complications arising from malnutrition and imbalanced diets can heavily impact education and employment opportunities and are heavily associated with stigma and racism toward Aboriginal people.

2. Options available to lower the cost of food and improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

- Aboriginal Communities are strongly connected to country, and ACCOs proactively work to increase the connectedness and belonging that Aboriginal people experience with culture, kinship, community, and country. Several ACCOs across Victoria are increasing this connectedness, while addressing food insecurity, through the development of **on-country Community Gardens**.
- In 2020, following the devastating bushfires in the Snowy Mountains surrounding Orbost, **Moogji Aboriginal Council** was one of six Aboriginal Community

² VACCHO, (2020), *Balit Durn Durn – Strong brain, mind, intellect and sense of self. Report to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System*, Collingwood, Victoria.

Controlled Organisations to receive bushfire recovery funding. Moogji approached their recovery initiative by considering the interconnected factors of Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing, community connectedness and organisation, and the built and natural environment.

- Moogji developed a large scale Community Garden through which Aboriginal Elders were engaged to revive and share knowledge about traditional food growing and food-related cultural practices. The garden is used for young people to undertake on-country nutrition and food education, which is often led by Aboriginal Elders.
- The garden has grown into a thriving and successful plant nursery and a productive source of nutritious produce for the local Aboriginal Community. It is also a source of pride for the Aboriginal Elders and the wider Community, facilitating increased engagement with Moogji's health and social services.
- VACCHO undertook an evaluation of Moogji's bushfire recovery initiative, which was published in our 2023 *Culture and Kinship Evaluation Report*, demonstrating through an internationally assured Social Return on Investment (SROI) evaluation that \$8.29 of social value was returned for every \$1.00 invested.³
- In 2022, VACCHO formed a partnership with the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation, in recognition of a mutual desire to develop more Community Garden/Kitchen Garden initiatives in ACCOs across Victoria.
- Community Garden initiatives cannot be achieved at scale unless dedicated, reliable, and consistent funding is committed by the Victorian Government to resourcing their establishment and maintenance within Victorian Aboriginal Communities.

³ VACCHO, (2023), *Culture and Kinship Evaluation Report*, Collingwood, Victoria.

Conclusion

Addressing food insecurity within Victorian Aboriginal Communities is an urgent matter requiring a comprehensive and coordinated response by the Victorian Government. However, this response must recognise and support the ACCOs that are already proactively responding to the challenges within their Communities. These responses are largely the result of place-based, self-determined, Aboriginal leadership. The initiatives that have emerged because of this leadership now need dedicated, reliable, and consistent funding to be maintained, and to be expanded or replicated across the state.

Community-led initiatives such as Moogji's Community Garden achieve much more than addressing food security in isolation. They address the interconnected factors of Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing, community connectedness and organisation, and the built and natural environment. They also drive greater engagement with ACCO health and social services and provide a place for on-country food and nutrition education to be delivered through the revival and sharing of knowledge about traditional food growing and food-related cultural practices.

Many non-Aboriginal communities are rightly proud and protective of their right and ability to express and celebrate their culture through the food they eat. Their children commence their food education early in life, through being introduced to food knowledge and food-related cultural practices that have been upheld and celebrated across many generations of cultural and family life. In this inquiry into food security in Victoria, VACCHO urges the committee to recognise and acknowledge that many Aboriginal families in Victoria today are not able to share in this joy of cultural expression through the food we eat, and we face barriers to obtaining the food-related knowledge that our ancestors once had in abundance. **This is because we have survived the intentional attempt to disrupt and destroy the continuity of our Aboriginal cultural and family life, through which food knowledge is kept alive.**

Therefore, while action is needed to address the practical supply, affordability, and accessibility of healthy foods, it must also recognise and support the aspirations of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, as we lead the effort to restore the role of food in the cultural wellbeing of our Communities.

Contact: Abe Ropitini, Executive Director - Population Health | [REDACTED]

Reference List

1. Browne J, Walker T, Hill, K, Brown A, Mitchell F, Thow, S, Ryan J, Beswick H et al., (2023), *Food policies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (FoodPATH): Community Report*, Deakin University and Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Collingwood, Victoria.
2. VACCHO, (2020), *Balit Durn Durn - Strong brain, mind, intellect and sense of self. Report to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System*, Collingwood, Victoria.
3. VACCHO, (2023), *Culture and Kinship Evaluation Report*, Collingwood, Victoria.