Mr E O'Donohue MLC  
Chairperson, Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee  
Parliament of Victoria  
Spring Street  
Melbourne 3000  

Dear Mr O'Donohue  

re: Review of the Charter of Human Rights & Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic)  

Victoria has led Australian Governments with the Human Rights Charter (2006) which has spawned a different way of thinking and many outstanding state-wide initiatives. An excellent example is the outcome from Stage One of the Victorian Local Governance Association partnership with the Australian Centre for Human Rights Education (Ramcharan et al, 2009) (http://www.vlga.org.au/Resources/Human_Rights_Toolkit.aspx).  

The importance of retaining the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and building on it to secure the future for all Victorians is mandatory. It will provide much needed support for the preventive environmental measures required to respond adequately to the threats to health and wellbeing which currently exist for all Victorians and which are expected to dramatically increase in severity in the future (McMichael and Butler, 2005; Edwards et al, 2011).  

I am writing to request serious consideration for the inclusion of additional human rights in the Charter as set out in the relevant United Nations Conventions.  

My serious concerns are presented here on the basis of current knowledge and long experience in the field of food, nutrition and dietetics. These concerns are now expressed in a food insecurity framework.  

Food and human rights is not mentioned in the Australian constitution, but there is Australian bi-partisan policy agreement and support for UN work on human rights as Australia is a signatory to a number of International Codes, including the following:  
- CODEX Alimentarius  
- Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion  
- United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child  
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights  
- World Health Organisation International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes  
- World Declaration and Plan of Action on Nutrition  
- World Trade Organisation Agreement on Agriculture  

I am sure that all Australians agree with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which states "Everyone has the right to a decent life, including enough food, clothing, housing, medical care and social services. Society should help those that are unable to
work because they are unemployed, sick, disabled, or too old to work. Mothers and babies are entitled to special care and assistance”

It is this clause of Human Rights that I request be given serious consideration for inclusion in the Victorian Charter.

The human right to water security and food security is an established moral and legal concept across the world which is based on dignity and physiological, psychological and social needs of all individuals across the life cycle. The very real outcomes are improved civic safety, the greater contribution of a population with improved health and wellbeing to the common good (through employment and efficiency) and decreased government costs for policing, community, and health services.

“Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 2006)

Food insecurity is increasing in Victoria, and no longer can we proclaim that all of the Victorian population are food secure. In 2008, 5.6% of adults reported that they had run out of food in the previous 12 months and could not afford to buy more (State of Victoria, 2010). This represents several hundred thousand individuals across Victoria but is only the tip of the iceberg and is a disgraceful state of affairs, as is the increasing number of families requesting emergency food relief.

In this era of a State full of food and unprecedented waste, food now viewed as a commodity to be bought and sold for the benefit of Corporations and their shareholders. In the face of overall Victorian food security, local food security is highly variable and the food supply distribution is not equitable across Victoria.

There are many serious barriers to achieving municipal and local food security such as no local food grown, building on arable land, centralisation of food supplies, lack of integrated local transport to food supplies, increasing fuel and food costs, and many more (Victorian Local Governance Association 2011, Vic Health, 2011).

Women of child bearing age, pregnant and lactating women and children have particularly important food and nutrition needs related to particular stages of the life cycle. If these needs are not met at the appropriate physiological age/stage, there are health effects at the time or later in life.

When children suffer from food insecurity (usually intermittent in Victoria) and are deprived of adequate food and nutrition at important stages of growth, there are long lasting and often permanently damaging consequences. The effects on psychological and social well-being and behavioural and mental problems often take place gradually over time and are invisible.

The proliferation of community based school food programs (The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation, 2011; Australian Red Cross, 2011) is testament to the community concerns about the large number of school children who are perceived to be food insecure by their teachers, community workers, and the community at large.

When pregnant and lactating women do not have food security, the health of the mother suffers and adds to her burden of disease and morbidity and reduced longevity later in life.
Many of the rapidly increasing numbers of elderly people do not have local food security and are being prematurely forced into dependency on Meals on Wheels and Home and Community Care Services because they cannot overcome the obstacles to accessing increasingly centralised food supplies.

About half of the total population of Victoria consists of these groups, and add the important consideration of other groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, people suffering from homelessness, people with disability and many others such as asylum seekers.

We must also be cognisant of the effect of the potentially increased burden of disease and physical and mental and behavioural problems which is associated with food insecurity.

In summary, food insecurity is a negative and often intermittent factor in the lives of many Victorians. This is potentially serious and most disadvantageous for the development of children and their health and well-being, and of pregnant and lactating women.

There are more humane and cost-effective ways of improving food security in our communities other than hit or miss School Breakfast Programs, Home and Community Care, Welfare Emergency Food Relief, and many other rapidly proliferating community strategies which only provide temporary support and are rarely sustainable.

Achievement of health and well-being is based on the essential need of all human beings (without exception) for air security, water security and food security throughout life from birth to death.

In this review of the Victorian Human Rights Charter (2006), please give serious consideration to inclusion of the following:

"Everyone has the right to a decent life, including enough food, clothing, housing, medical care and social services. Society should help those that are unable to work because they are unemployed, sick, disabled, or too old to work. Mothers and babies are entitled to special care and assistance" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).

I will be pleased to provide the Committee with further detail and information on this important subject, as requested.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Beverley Wood, PhD, RegdPHNutr, APD
Consultant in Food, Nutrition and Dietetics

encl. (bibliography)
Bibliography


