An urgent need for food security solutions for all Western Australians

Key messages

- Food security refers to all people at all times having **physical, social, and economic access to food.**
- People living in **regional and remote Western Australia** (WA) face **additional food system issues**, including food availability, access, price, quality, service provision, and transport **issues**. These amplify food security issues for communities.
- WA's **food system lacks resilience** and is highly centralised.
- The **dominant response** to poor food security is largely **government social welfare systems**, **emergency food relief**, and **nutrition education**/food skills programs, which are uncoordinated and do not address the root causes of the issue.

Background and context

Food security occurs when all people at all times have physical, social and economic access to nutritious food[1]. The concept includes availability; access; utilisation; stability of the supply[2]; agency; and sustainability[3] dimensions. Food insecurity is a lack of regular and reliable access to food to meet growth and development needs[4]. People experience food insecurity when they cannot regularly and reliably access food in adequate quantities for good health[5], or they obtain food in socially unacceptable ways. Ten per cent of Australian adults[6] and 20% of Western Australian children[7] are estimated to be food insecure. In South West WA during the COVID-19 pandemic, one in five adults were food insecure[8]. The problem is being amplified due to the current cost of living crisis. However, the current response to food insecurity is largely government social welfare systems, emergency food relief, and nutrition education/food skills programs. These responses are mostly uncoordinated and can be undignified[9]. Existing responses to food insecurity in WA are not working and do not consider holistic approaches to solving the issue.

Evidence and implications of food insecurity

People living in regional and remote areas face poorer food availability, variety, quality, and higher food cost, in comparison to their urban counterparts[10]. Inequitable health service provision, a lack of collaboration, limited cooking and nutrition skills, low income and poverty, transport and distance to food outlets, a lack of time[11], and crises including weather events and pandemics are additional issues. Regional and remote locations rely on highly centralised food supply chains, which are fragile and susceptible to disruption because of climatic events or crises[12] such as the COVID-19 pandemic[8, 13]. Many of these issues are food system issues, resulting in food insecurity. A lack of coordinated action to address these issues is hampering efforts to support food security across WA[11], particularly for priority populations. Poverty in the first five years of life substantially impacts development and potential employment in adulthood[14]. Other food insecurity consequences include psychological (e.g. anxiety), social (e.g. behavioural issues) and

physical (e.g. nutrient deficiencies)[14-17] issues. A portfolio of holistic food security solutions is required, to support all Western Australians, regardless of their geographic location, to be food secure. Collective government and community leadership will be most effective to support this issue.

Benefits of facilitating increased food security for all Western Australians

Health benefits

Policies that address hunger would facilitate food systems that are healthy and nutritious[3]. Increasing food availability for all Western Australians could lead to greater food choice[18]; increased nutrition knowledge and cooking skills, potentially resulting in more nutrient-dense diets[19, 20].

Ecological benefits

Approaches that consider place-based context, such as facilitating shorter food supply chains, would facilitate food systems that are more resilient and productive[3, 21], promote biodiversity and soil fertility. Improved food system quality would result in a more regenerative and productive food system[3].

Economic benefits

Supporting local food production, distribution and sales opportunities could result in greater job creation and the multiplier effects of local food purchasing in regional area[22, 23].

Socio-cultural benefits

From a sociocultural perspective, purchasing locally grown food would support both the community and local producers[24], while engaging disadvantaged, marginalised and priority populations in food policy decision-making would support their agency[3] a central concept of rights-based approaches[25].

Collectively, these benefits would support the six interconnected food security dimensions, and would contribute to addressing Sustainable Development Goals[26], particularly Goal 2: Zero Hunger.

Recommendations

1. Develop a whole-of-government **Food System and Food Security Strategy**, with accompanying **Investment and Action Plan.** This would support capacity building and a coordinated, efficient approach to local food infrastructure, to **decentralise food processing and distribution in regional WA.**
2. **Establish a dedicated Food Systems and Food Security Advisory Committee/Council**, with a 33-33-33 split in representation between metropolitan, regional, and remote areas. The committee would identify services and policy decisions, in response to evidence, to best address food insecurity in WA. This should include short and long-term stability and sustainability initiatives and could support additional place-based coordinated committees.
3. **Empower and resource community food security initiatives** that are identified and led by community, and supported to ensure they are sustainable.
4. **View food security as a basic human right** and fulfil the binding International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights commitments. Incorporate human rights language into existing WA policies and plans, across government departments.
5. Provide **support and resourcing for food producers to adopt sustainable agricultural practices**, such as through training and grant schemes.

Further reading

Policy and research exemplars that support food security are included below.

Local government exemplars:

- Shire of Serpentine-Jarrahdale Local Food Action Plan.
- Shire of Augusta-Margaret River Sustainable Economy Strategy
- Shire of Denmark Sustainability Strategy 2021-2031.

WA state level initiatives or research exemplars:

- Sustainable Health Review.
- 'Hungry for Change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty' Inquiry Report.
- Curtin University and Perth NRM's food security plan for Western Australia.
- Primary Industries Plan 2020-2024.
- WA Food Relief Framework 2019.
- Food Policy Index report for Western Australia

Other Australian exemplars:

- Towards a Healthy, Regenerative and Equitable Food System in Victoria Consensus Statement.
- Tasmanian Food Security Strategy 2021-2024 and Action Plan 2023-2025.
- Household Food Security Data Consensus Statement

International exemplars:

- Vermont Agriculture and Food System Strategic Plan 2021-2023.
- Good Food Nation Act 2022 (Scotland)
- UK Right to Food Campaign.

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About the Food Community project

The Food Community project was created to explore the many initiatives that support healthy food availability, access and use and strengthen how these initiatives work together to support food security action at the community level. The project is a collaboration between Edith Cowan University, the Public Health Advocacy Institute, Wicked Lab, and the WA Country Health Service. It is funded by Healthway. The project started as a pilot in the South West region of Western Australia in 2018, and is now being implemented across WA regions including the Wheatbelt, Midwest, Great Southern, Kimberley, Goldfields and Pilbara regions. The Food Community website has been developed to support the Food Community network and to connect participants, stakeholders, and the wider community. It provides details of a range of government and community initiatives, provides information and resources about food security, details opportunities to connect and collaborate locally, and ideas on how stakeholders and community members can advocate for improved healthy food availability, access and use for all.

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