

Submission to the Energy, Food and Water Security Inquiry

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Introduction

UNICEF Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to Energy, Food and Water Security Inquiry.

This submission outlines relevant evidence from a joint report from UNICEF Australia, Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre and Royal Far West, *Flood Response and Recovery in Fitzroy Crossing Needs Assessment* (the Needs Assessment) and the implications in relation to food security. This submission will not make comments or recommendations in relation to energy security as this is currently outside of UNICEF Australia's scope.

The Needs Assessment was undertaken in response to the record flooding that impacted the town of Fitzroy and surrounds in January 2023. Community-based partners invited UNICEF Australia to undertake the post-flood needs assessment with affected communities, with a particular focus on the needs of children and their families. Food insecurity for First Nations children prior to, during and after the floods was a key finding of the Needs Assessment.

A) The context and extent of energy, food and water security in Northern Australia

The context of food and water security in Northern Australia

Food and water insecurity is consistently identified as an issue facing remote communities across Northern Australia. The *2020 Report on Food Pricing and Food Security in Remote Indigenous Communities* identified food insecurity and a lack of fresh health food options in remote stores as a major concern.ⁱ The *Closing the Gap 2023 Implementation Plan* notes the 'unique, additional barriers to food security' for remote communities 'by nature of their geographic isolation and lower on average incomes compared to urban or regional centres.'ⁱⁱ The *Closing the Gap 2023 Annual Report* and *2024 Implementation Plan* notes the development of a Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations Communities in response. Water security is also noted as a key commitment within *Closing the Gap*, which includes priority investments to improve water security in the Northern Territory.

There is a strong intersection with food and water insecurity and climate change, as this will be exacerbated as the climate changes and Australia experiences for frequent and severe natural hazards. This risk has been recognised the National Climate Risk Assessment.ⁱⁱⁱ

The impact on children

For children, food security is key to their healthy development. Children physiologically need to eat and drink more than adults per unit of body weight and are more likely to be affected by malnutrition and dehydration.^{iv} Children and young people's exposure to climate shocks and hazards further impact children's access to food and adequate nutrition.^v This can create cycles of malnutrition as well as obesity.^{vi} Regional and remote communities, particularly First Nations communities, already face significant barriers to accessing healthy and nutritious food and therefore are more vulnerable to increasing food insecurity due to climate change.

Water and food insecurity are also exacerbated during and after disasters.^{vii} First Nations children and children living in remote or regional communities are more likely to be exposed to disasters, and are more vulnerable to their impacts. Children and young people from inner and outer regional areas are between 3.8 and 7.5 times more likely to experience disasters compared to those in major cities. Children and young people in remote or very remote locations are 7.2 to 16.5 times more likely to experience disasters.^{viii}

As such, there is the need for a specific focus on the needs of children and young people, particularly First nations children and young people, when considering food security in Northern Australia and the intersection with their increasing exposure to climate shocks and hazards.

Our Needs Assessment found that children in Fitzroy Crossing experienced unprecedented food insecurity after the 2023 flood, which led to poor nutrition and hunger. Communities were cut off from fresh food deliveries, there was inconsistent supplies of food in the Fitzroy Valley, and the food that was available was increasingly expensive.

“There were families and children who were going without food for days. They were starving.”
Aboriginal community member, quoted in the Needs Assessment.

“Most people don’t have too much food at home usually. Then they lost everything, they had nothing. Trucks were cut-off. But no one really knew. [People visited] food banks, everyone wanted to get as much as possible because they didn’t know how long it [a shortage of food supplies] would go for. People had to go to the collection point every day. They would give you a meal that would barely feed the household. The need for food packages meant all the stock of the supermarkets had run out – there was no tea, steaks, pasta, rice and potatoes. Some people would get frozen packs but not everyone had ovens or microwaves and so these food items were unsuitable. People also received food that was culturally inappropriate, such as hummus.” Informant quoted in the Needs Assessment.

The Needs Assessment also demonstrated the link between connection to Country and food security. The 2023 Fitzroy Valley floods resulted in significant damage to Country, which impacted the social and emotional wellbeing of First Nations children and community members. Following the floods, it was unsafe to engage in some cultural practices, such as hunting, fishing or sourcing seasonal bushfoods. This not only impacted children’s food security, but also their social and emotional wellbeing as they were unable to engage in cultural practices and connect to Country. It also had implications for the continuity of cultural knowledge and practices.

B) The challenges and potential actions to improve energy, food and water security

Aboriginal leadership and community control

In line with a right-based approach and the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), UNICEF Australia strongly supports the need for any potential actions to improve energy, food and water security to be led, designed and implemented under the guidance and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Recommendation 1

That Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples lead the design of any actions to improve energy, food and water security in Northern Australia, and particularly in remote communities.

An accurate picture of the risk to children

Despite the heightened vulnerability children face to climate shocks and hazards, and the risk of food and water insecurity as a result, there is currently no national picture of climate disaster risks across Australia and their impact on children. The Committee could consider how specific considerations of children and young people’s exposure to disasters and climate change and their associated vulnerabilities might be included in key national risk assessments, such as the National Climate Risk Assessment and the National Natural Hazards Disaster Risk. This would better inform long-term food and water security planning for remote communities, as well as short term food relief after disasters.

UNICEF Australia would welcome the use of UNICEF’s Children’s Climate Risk Index-Disaster Risk Model (CCRI-DRM) in Australia to help provide a clearer, more nuanced and place-based picture of climate disaster risk for children across Australia. The CCRI-DRM is a unique tool which would capture the exposure and vulnerabilities of children to climate change and disasters in Australia, in order to:

- Reduce existing vulnerabilities of children so they can better withstand the impacts of climate change.
- Build the resilience of the services children need to survive, grow and thrive.

Water scarcity and child nutrition are two key areas that are considered in the CCRI-DRM.

Recommendation 2

The National Climate Risk Assessment and the National Natural Hazards Disaster Risk Profile should include a specific section on children and young people's exposure and vulnerability to disasters, to better inform food and water security planning.

Recommendation 3

The Committee consider the use of a tool such as the CCRI-DRM to help provide a more nuanced picture of climate disaster risk for children in Northern Australia, and the intersection with food and water security.

C) The impact this has on communities, particularly remote communities

The impact on communities and remote communities is addressed in the first two sections above.

D) Relevant Closing the Gap targets

Food and water security are relevant to a number of Closing the Gap outcomes and targets, including:

- Outcome 1: Everyone enjoys long and healthy lives.
 - o Target 1: Close the Gap in life expectancy within a generation, by 2031 (noting the indicator specifically on prevalence rates of health risks factors including smoking alcohol and drug use, overweight and obesity, dietary factors, physical activity)
- Outcome 9: People can secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need.
 - o In particular, target 9a and 9b in relation to appropriate and affordable housing, given that food, water and energy security are critical for appropriate, climate resilient housing.
- Outcome 14: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing, and Outcome 15: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people maintain a distinctive cultural, spiritual, physical and economic relationship with their land and waters, noting that the ability to undertake cultural practices such as hunting and fishing are a part of food and water security.

Food and water insecurity also intersect with Closing the Gap outcomes 3 -5 relating to the early years and education.

About UNICEF Australia

UNICEF believes in a fair chance for every child and we are the world's leading organisation working to protect and improve the lives of children in over 190 countries. At UNICEF Australia we work to protect and promote children's rights by elevating their voices and advocating for the rights of children in Australia and overseas.

ⁱ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2020, 'Report on food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities', available: https://www.aph.gov.au/-/media/02_Parliamentary_Business/24_Committees/243_Reps_Committees/Indigenous/Food_pricing/Report.pdf?la=en&hash=13F5E4BE6B2757223211A7C5E0353BDD9DCDBD14

ⁱⁱ Commonwealth of Australia, 'Commonwealth Closing the Gap Implementation Plan 2023', available:

<https://www.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/publications/closing-the-gap-implementation-plan-2023.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ DCCEEW 2024, 'National Climate Risk Assessment – first pass assessment report', Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, Canberra, March. Available at www.dcceew.gov.au/climate-change/publications/ncra-first-pass-risk-assessment

^{iv} UNICEF, 2024, 'A Threat to Progress: Confronting the Effects of Climate Change on Child Health and Well-being', UNICEF, New York, available: [A Threat to Progress 190824 EN.pdf](#)

^v Ibid.

^{vi} UNICEF Australia, 2024, 'Rapid Review of Child-Sensitive National Adaptation Plans', based on a rapid review undertaken by Pasanna Mutha-Merrennege, available: https://assets-us-01.kc-usercontent.com/99f113b4-e5f7-00d2-23c0-c83ca2e4cfa2/9e13c4e9-4260-42c4-97a9-32bd6947a801/UA_NAP%20Rapid-Review-2024_final.pdf

^{vii} The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights Crisis: Introducing the Children's Climate Risk Index. New York: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2021. View at: <https://www.unicef.org/media/105376/file/UNICEF-climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis.pdf> and [A Threat to Progress 190824 EN.pdf](#)

^{viii} Deloitte Access Economics and UNICEF Australia, 2024, 'The impact of natural disasters on children and young people', available: assets-us-01.kc-usercontent.com/99f113b4-e5f7-00d2-23c0-c83ca2e4cfa2/b4063197-fe66-457c-b685-068e7cece44c/Deloitte_and_UNICEF_Australia_The_impact_of_natural_disasters_on_children_and_young_people_2024_Report_Final.pdf