

Submission to the National Strategy for Food Security in First Nations Communities

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For further information or questions about this submission please contact:

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Introduction

UNICEF Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Australian Government's National Strategy for Food Security in First Nations Communities (the Strategy). This submission responds to the suggested Focus Areas and issues as raised in the Discussion Paper.

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). 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 a post-flood needs assessment with affected communities, with a particular focus on the needs of children and their families. Food security for First Nations children prior to, during and after the floods was a key finding of the Needs Assessment. Based on this evidence, this submission provides some suggestions as to how the Strategy could strengthen the focus on the intersection between climate change, disasters and food security for First Nations children in remote communities.

Children and Food Security

When it comes to food security, 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. These risks are then exacerbated during and after disastersⁱ.

As such, UNICEF Australia strongly support the focus on children in the Discussion Paper, including:

- the explicit and meaningful references to the distinct ways children are affected by food insecurity in remote communities;
- the inclusion of outcomes that relate to child-critical services and activities, such as nutrition education in remote health services for expectant parents and young children; and
- the holistic and multisectoral approach reflected in the Discussion Paper that addresses the needs of children and their families across child critical services such as health and housing.

Feedback on Focus Areas in the Discussion Paper

UNICEF Australia supports the eight suggested focus areas in the Discussion Paper and includes suggestions as to how some areas could be strengthened below.

Country

UNICEF Australia supports this as a critical focus area. The Needs Assessment found that the 2023 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 on the continuity of cultural knowledges and practiceⁱⁱ.

The Strategy could also consider ways in which disasters and climate change may impact connections to Country and traditional knowledge under the Country Focus Area, to ensure that food security is maintained during and after disasters. Potentially, an expanded Indigenous Rangers program could integrate food security and disaster resilience as a potential action in the Strategy.

Health

The focus on nutrition education and comprehensive health promotion programs in remote communities across the lifecycle in the Discussion Paper is welcome, and as noted as part of the outcome, adequate resourcing for these programs is critical.

The intersection between these programs and child primary health care needs could also be considered. The Needs Assessment found that prior to the floods, First Nations children in Fitzroy Crossing had significant unmet physical and mental health needs. Six months after the floods, the Bayulu Clinic was opened to help meet the health needs of the Fitzroy Crossing community, however there is still a need for a comprehensive review of child health services, including their cultural appropriateness, service gaps including Aboriginal Health Workers and Aboriginal Liaison Officers, training needs, and coordination, to inform further planning to meet the health needs of children in the communityⁱⁱⁱ.

Nutrition education must be considered in the context of the overall primary health care needs and service gaps for First Nations children in remote communities. As such, UNICEF Australia strongly supports the last potential action in this section, that states 'In line with Closing the Gap Outcome 2, ensure remote health services are sufficiently resourced to provide culturally appropriate, comprehensive and accessible support for expectant parents and young children'^{iv}.

Housing

UNICEF Australia welcomes the focus in the Discussion Paper on the ways in which climate change can exacerbate existing barriers to food security caused by poor infrastructure and overcrowding. The Needs Assessment affirms the importance of climate resilient housing to ensure that First Nations children in remote communities have access to appropriate housing to grow, develop and thrive.

It will be critical to ensure that the Strategy intersects with Australia's National Adaptation Plan. Conversely, the National Adaptation Plan should also consider how the Australian Government can support secure, climate resilient housing in remote communities^v.

Families and Community Infrastructure and Supply Chains

UNICEF Australia supports a focus on emergencies and the intersection with food security in both the Families and Community Infrastructure, and Supply Chains focus areas.

The Strategy could be strengthened by a concurrent process to prioritise a clearer and more nuanced picture of climate disasters risk across Australia and their impact on children, particularly First Nations children and other marginalised children. Specific consideration of children and young people's exposure and vulnerabilities to disasters and climate change should be included in the National Climate Risk Assessment and the National Natural Hazards Disaster Risk, and this could better inform long term food security planning for remote communities, as well as short term food relief after disasters.

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 advocating for the rights of children in Australia and overseas, and elevating their voices.

ⁱ 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>

ⁱⁱ UNICEF Australia, Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre and Royal Far West, *Flood Response and Recovery in Fitzroy Crossing Needs Assessment*, available here: <https://www.unicef.org.au/fitzroy-crossing-needs-assessment>

ⁱⁱⁱ Dossetor, P.J., Thorburn, K., Oscar, J. et al. Review of Aboriginal child health services in remote Western Australia identifies challenges and informs solutions. BMC Health Serv Res 19, 758 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-019-4605-0>

^{iv} [Discussion Paper - National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations Communities \(niaa.gov.au\)](#) p20

^v UNICEF Australia, Fitzroy Crossing Policy Brief, available here: <https://www.unicef.org.au/fitzroy-crossing-policy-brief>