



CENTRAL LAND COUNCIL

**Submissions to the *National Strategy for Food Security in
Remote First Nations Communities***

AUGUST 2024

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About the Central Land Council

The Central Land Council (CLC) is a Commonwealth corporate entity established under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 (ALRA), with statutory responsibilities for Aboriginal land acquisition and land management in the southern half of the Northern Territory (NT). The CLC is also a Native Title Representative Body established under the Native Title Act 1993 (NTA).

Pursuant to ALRA, more than 50 per cent of the NT and more than 85 per cent of the NT coastline is now held by Aboriginal Land Trusts on behalf of traditional owners. A further 253,886 square kilometres of land and water is also held under native title.

Of the approximately 780,000 km² of land covered by the CLC region, more than half (417,318 km²) is Aboriginal land under the ALRA. In addition, rights have been asserted and won under the NTA, and traditional owners unable to claim land under the ALRA have succeeded in obtaining rights to small areas known as Community Living Areas, under NT legislation.

Through its elected representative Council of 90 community delegates, the CLC represents the interests and aspirations of approximately 20,000 traditional landowners and other Aboriginal people resident in its region. We advocate for our people on a wide range of land-based, economic and socio-political issues to ensure that our families can continue to survive and thrive on their land.

Introduction

The Central Land Council welcomes the release of the National Food Security Strategy discussion paper and we are pleased to have this opportunity to advocate for the needs and interests of our members with respect to the critical issue of food security across the CLC region. At a time when the impact of the cost of living crisis on most Australians is being reported daily, it is important to consider how much more severe the impact is on Aboriginal residents of remote communities across the county and specifically in the Northern Territory where people's health and living circumstances are the worst in the country across almost every indicator.

Aboriginal people living in remote communities in the Northern Territory (NT) experience the deepest levels of poverty in the country.¹ The effects of this poverty are pervasive and profound. As highlighted by Markham and Altman (2019), the best epidemiological research available estimates that one-third to half of the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the NT is the result of poverty.² Poverty is quite literally, killing Aboriginal people – and it is Aboriginal people in remote communities who are suffering the most. While nationally, Indigenous poverty rates have been declining slowly over the past decade, poverty in remote Aboriginal communities is climbing.

The poverty and associated health, education and life expectancy issues experienced in our remote communities are the consequence of many historical factors particularly the relatively recent experiences of colonisation that included the forced removal of Aboriginal people from traditional lands to make way for pastoralism and settlements, massacres and murders of Aboriginal people and the stolen generations. The damaging effects of this history have been compounded in more recent times by waves of poorly designed, top down government policies aimed at addressing the

¹ Altman, J. (2018) Land Rights News, Northern Edition, December 2018.

² Markham, F. and Altman, J. (2019) Submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs' *Inquiry into the Adequacy of Newstart and related payments and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR), Australian National University (ANU) p.6, citing Zhao, Y., Wright, J., Begg, S. and S. Gurthridge (2013) Decomposing Indigenous life expectancy gap by risk factors: A life table Analysis, *Population Health Metrics*, 11(1), 1 ([weblink](#))

'problem' of Aboriginal disadvantage that change with every new government, the most significant and lasting being the 2007 NT Emergency Response (Intervention).

The statistical evidence describing the dire gaps in health, education and other quality of life outcomes for Aboriginal people are well described in the National Strategy for Food Security Discussion paper so won't be repeated here. Suffice to say that their extreme nature constitutes a national crisis. It is deeply concerning to the CLC that despite decades of attempts to address food insecurity in remote communities through Commonwealth inquiries, nutrition strategies, food action plans, summits and stores licensing, the underlying causes and ongoing destructive impacts of poverty and food insecurity remain entrenched and are arguably worsening.

In this submission, the CLC puts forward recommendations that have been made in previous submissions but also draws out urgent actions and commitments that need to be implemented quickly to save the lives of those who are already chronically ill or showing early signs and to protect the futures of children who are malnourished now and risk being unable to fully engage in the learning and development opportunities and lifespan taken for granted by most non-Indigenous Australians. The most urgent of these relate to addressing income inequality through increased income support. We have also brought forward recommendations regarding governance of the finalisation and implementation of the Strategy as it is critical that actions included in National, State and Territory implementation plans lead to real and measurable change.

Our submission does not include a separate set of recommendations on health which is outside our expertise and will be comprehensively addressed by Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services in their submissions. However many of our recommendations around healthy stores and income address the changes needed to improve people's health where health issues are related to poor diet or inadequate food.

Summary of Recommendations

Policies, Practice and Governance

1. The governance of the strategy should be ongoing and supported by a clear monitoring and evaluation strategy to track progress against priority recommendations.
2. Any existing or newly formed governing entity must include a membership that reflect the broad policy agenda of the strategy or institute appropriate reporting mechanisms.
3. The critical principles that must apply to the implementation of any governing entity and the implementation of the strategy is that they are done in genuine partnership with Aboriginal people and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health organisations consistent with priority Reform 1 of Closing the Gap.

Healthy Economies

4. Permanently and adequately **increase Jobseeker and all other income support payments** to keep people out of poverty, and provide for the ongoing indexation of all payments.
5. Substantially **increase the Remote Area Allowance** to appropriately account for the higher cost of living in remote areas and set appropriate ongoing indexation arrangements. Equal standards of living for recipients of a given payment, regardless of location, should be a policy principle that underpins our social security system (see more detail at **Appendix B**).
6. Resource targeted efforts to **make sure Aboriginal people living in remote communities are in receipt of the income support payments for which they are eligible**, remedying the legacy of high rates of suspensions during the most punitive days of CDP and the withdrawal of face-to-face Centrelink services in remote areas.
7. Develop **national poverty reduction targets and measures**. The Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee should be tasked with monitoring progress against these targets and publicly reporting on this, including reporting on the levels of income poverty experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, nationally, by states and territory, and by remoteness.
8. **Strengthen the representativeness, focus, independence and transparency of the Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee**, by amending the legislated terms of reference so that they:
 - Ensure sufficient Indigenous representation on the Committee, including representation from remote NT. The membership of the Committee should be representative of the people most impacted by the issues it seeks to investigate.
 - Provide for individuals directly affected by poverty to be represented on the Committee. Committee members should be remunerated so that income is not a barrier to participation.
 - Ensure the Committee can examine the specific policies contributing to the uniquely high rates of poverty in remote NT, including the operation of the Community Development Program, the adequacy of the Remote Area Allowance and access to income support payments. The section currently allowing Ministers to direct the focus of the Committee to the exclusion of some matters (section 8(6)(b)) should be removed.
 - Add the eradication of poverty as an explicit focus of the Committee.
9. Require for the government to formally respond to the Committee's report (and in a timely manner and that the government's response is published).

Summary of Recommendations cont..

Country

10. Ranger Program funders including the Commonwealth and NT Governments and the ILSC to ensure funding provided is flexible, long-term and responsive to the on-ground needs of programs e.g. includes infrastructure funding including staff housing and ranger headquarters construction and/or upgrades and vehicles and funding for critical coordination roles.
11. Governments to develop regional food security strategies that embed principals of Aboriginal community control and Aboriginal employment, training and economic outcomes particularly with respect to local and regional food production projects and enterprises.
12. Existing Aboriginal Community controlled and initiated horticulture pilot initiatives (or through genuine business partnership models that bring horticulture expertise to Aboriginal Community controlled organisations) should be supported and carefully monitored to ensure the outcomes are documented and inform future projects. Current examples include the Centrefarm Farm trials and Work Experience Pilot Pathway (WEPP) program at Alekarenge and the Pilot farm at Yirrkala which is now supplying fresh fruit and vegies to stores on the Gove Peninsula.
13. Regional food security strategies should explore opportunities to further develop local food production, warehousing and distribution hubs around these and future Aboriginal Controlled horticulture projects to reduce freight costs, diversify access to fresh fruits and vegetable and native bush foods in local community stores.

Housing

14. The NT Government provide a detailed response to the 2023 Review of The NTG Healthy Homes repair and maintenance program to ensure issues are identified and resolved as we move into the implementation of the new Ten Year Remote Housing Partnership Agreement
15. The Joint Steering Committee for the new Ten Year Remote Housing partnership agreement ensure a sufficient proportion of the \$4 billion housing funds are allocated to preventive and cyclical repairs and maintenance of existing housing stock. This is critical to ensuring all houses are able to meet the benchmarks for the nine-healthy living practices designed by Healthabitat and adopted by the Northern Territory Government in its New Housing design guidelines and the HealthyHomes preventative repair and maintenance contracts. In the context of remote food security this particularly relates to Healthy Living Practice 4:

'- improving nutrition- assessing the ability to prepare and store food, making sure the stove works and improving the functionality of the kitchen.'

Stores Governance

16. The NT Stores Licensing program support a framework for community store management that promotes, supports and monitors the health of local store governance.
17. Existing locally owned and managed stores to negotiate management partnerships with Store Management bodies that maximise local governance and control while increasing store access to training, healthy food promotion and the benefits of coordinated warehousing, freight and other associated economies of scale.
18. That store management bodies work with local communities to develop a community development approach to electing store directors that provides an opportunity for the community as a whole to elect directors but also to set broad principles and guidelines for critical store decisions including:
 - Use of store profits
 - Proportion of profits allocated to community projects and store price reductions
 - Director entitlements

Summary of recommendations cont...

19. Community owned and managed stores to be provided with independent information regarding the performance of various store management groups to enable informed decisions about store management partnership arrangements to ensure they can meet the aspirations of the community.

Healthy Stores

20. A direct to consumer, point of sale subsidy to address financial barriers and increase affordability of essential food, including fruit and vegetables, in remote areas funded by at least a 20% hypothecated tax on sugar, including all sugar-sweetened beverages, to rebalance the high cost of healthy foods against the relative affordability of unhealthy foods.
21. Advocate for an economy of scale store model increasing collective buying power of small independent or community owned stores passing on lower prices to the community.
22. Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services to be the preferred providers of public health and nutrition programs and other initiatives to address food security in Aboriginal communities.
23. Consistent guidelines or all licences remote stores that follow the recommendations of the Coalition for Healthy Remote Stores:
 - No promotions on unhealthy food and drinks
 - No unhealthy food and drinks in high traffic areas
 - No sugary soft drinks more than 600 ml in refrigerators
 - Less than 40% of refrigerator facings for sugar sweetened beverages
 - A minimum of 10 fresh fruit and vegetable varieties
 - Pricing Policy to promote healthy food and drinks and disincentives unhealthy ones.

Supply Chains

The CLC supports the following recommendations put forward in the LGANT submission:

24. The Commonwealth and state and territory jurisdictions collaborate on the development of a sustainable road funding model for properly maintaining the local road network through better upfront investment so that it is more resilient to the effects of severe weather.
25. That the Commonwealth adopts a strong leadership role in efforts to improve disaster mitigation efforts, including supporting local governments with greater upfront investment in building more resilient infrastructure to minimise the much more substantial costs of replacing infrastructure destroyed by severe weather events.

The Central Land Council also endorses the following recommendations from the 2023 Grattan Institute report, 'Potholes and Pitfalls: How to fix Local Roads'.

26. Increase core funding to local governments with a \$600 million annual increase in the Financial Assistance Grants, and a \$400 million annual increase to Roads to Recovery funds. It should index both funds to a cost index that reflects changes in the costs that councils face, and population; and
27. establish a \$200 million per year fund to assess and upgrade local roads identified as priority freight routes, in exchange for the council providing permit access to compliant heavy vehicles
28. Ensure untied funding goes where it is needed most. The federal government should fix the distribution of the Financial Assistance Grants by allocating grants between and within states according to the principle that every council should have the capacity to provide a similar level of service to their community.

Evidence and Case Studies from Central Australia

The evidence for the comparatively high cost of food in remote NT communities has been well documented through the NT Government's Market Basket Survey (MBS). The 2023 MBS is the 21st survey conducted since 1998. The MBS tracks the price differential for a basket of Healthy food (based on the Australian Dietary Guidelines) and a current diet basket (based on the latest survey data on the dietary patterns of Torres Strait Islander people in Australia) and compares the cost of both baskets in remote stores to their cost in major district supermarkets (as well as to corner stores and small supermarkets).

The findings of the 2023 survey confirm the following:

- The actual cost of a Healthy Food Basket in remote stores has been higher than the projected cost each year since 2006
- The cost difference of a Healthy Food Basket is 40% higher in remote stores than district major supermarkets
- The costs difference was highest in 2017 when the Healthy Food Basket cost 60% more in remote stores
- Since 2000 the price gap for a healthy food basket in remote stores has fluctuated annually but overall has increased by approximately 10%³

In addition to higher food costs the situation for remote residents is exacerbated by high fuel costs. Many community stores in remote communities carry limited and expensive stocks of essential goods, food and clothing. It is therefore common practice for families to travel to major centres to shop at larger supermarkets and chain stores like Kmart. While the goods are more affordable and the selection of goods far greater than in remote stores, the benefit is often cancelled out by the additional fuel costs, wear and tear on vehicles and reliance on takeaway foods while away from home.

The NT My Fuel website provides a 24 hour snapshot of average fuel prices across the NT. On 2 August 2024, the lowest price for diesel in a major regional centre in Central Australia was \$193.50 per litre from Alice Springs OPT and the highest price was \$213.90 per litre at Coles Express in Alice Springs. This compares to the lowest diesel price of \$269 per litre at Mutitjulu community and a highest price of \$3.20 per litre at Imanpa Community (272 km from Alice Springs). Assuming an optimistic average fuel consumption of nine kilometres per litre, a person travelling from Imanpa to Alice Springs and return to shop will pay at least an extra \$200 for the journey.

It is worth noting that during COVID the federal government increased income for social security and veteran's payment recipients by \$550 per fortnight (20 March 2020) which was subsequently reduced to a \$250 fortnightly supplement on 21 July 2020. In remote communities this was an important initiative given people were trapped in their communities mostly with access to just one store. In reality, many Aboriginal people living remotely remain financially trapped even without Coronavirus travel restrictions because of the high cost of fuel and the distance they need to travel to gain access to greater variety of more affordable goods. In addition, the lack of affordable public transport options for remote community residents compounds this. While some transport options exist between NT remote communities and major centres, there are gaps in the routes and fees are high. There is also no discount rate for Centrelink recipients, including aged pensioners. Rates for

³ NT Department of Health (2023), 2023 Market Basket Survey Summary Report, p4

children are only marginally cheaper than for adults: for example a one way ticket on the Bush Bus from Alice Springs to Yuendumu is \$140 per adult and \$105 per child.

This reality underpins the CLC recommendation to review and significantly increase the Remote Area Allowance supporting the food security discussion paper Potential Action “to provide the evidence base for payments to meet the food security needs of people living in remote communities.”⁴ See further detail on this recommendation in discussion under Health Economies (below).

CLC Member feedback on Food Security Issues

CLC members provided the following comments on food security issues in remote central Australia through interviews conducted by CLC staff (23 May 2024).

“Meat costs something like \$52 for two chops. A bottle of [soft] drink costs \$8. Our power card costs like \$50 and that probably lasts four days. To do shopping in town, it costs \$150 in fuel to get to town.” I. Reiff, Atitjere Community (215 km from Alice Springs)

“Before, we would walk into the shop with \$150 and come out with a box full of shopping. Now we just come out with a paper bag or something.” E. Kelly, Lajamanu Community (560 km from Katherine)

“I try to shop locally but the prices are high out in the remote areas. With the stuff that we constantly eat the prices are up. When you go into town those prices are half of the prices out bush. The cost of living in town and out remote is similar but it costs more to live out bush. We have to think smarter in how we do our shopping. Most of our shopping we buy in bulk. We are constantly planning on the outstations to survive and thrive out there.” L. Leichleitner, Town Bore Outstation (362 km from Alice Springs)

“Remote is really expensive for fuel and food. Our fuel is \$3.19. That’s too much, that’s taking advantage. I know that we’re remote, but we’re not remote, remote. If you want to talk about remote let’s go down to Rabbit Flat. That’s remote.” M. Doolan, Lajamanu Community (560 km from Katherine)

“The biggest impact has come from the power meters. Without consultation the government just came in and put the new meters in, without talking to us. Next minute we are paying double the price. Over one week it used to be \$60 now it’s \$200-\$300 for a week. Come Monday people don’t have any power.” G. Barnes, Lajamanu

“Harts Range shop is really dear. We can’t save money, we have to buy dear things. Like fridge [food] is dear, all the other vegetables and all that, they’re all dear. We have to go into town to do shopping. I have to wait for the bush bus, costs us \$80 and another \$80 to come back home.” J Webb, Atitjere

The additional comments below were made by Atitjere residents during community consultations on 26 June. 2024:

“Some days we go to town too but food –fuel is \$3 per litre/.. Other people are doing it tough. I see people go to the store there and come back with \$300-400 box of food. That’s a lot for just one box of food. You can get 6, 7 or 8 bags for that much in Alice Springs/.. Meat is top of the shelf now yeah—you pay a fortune. But my way we might go and hunt a kangaroo/.. People go into town every fortnight when they get. Most people are on Centrelink. But they still have to pay for fuel. For me it’s

⁴ NIAA (2024), National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations Communities, P46

\$3 per litre. \$250 km. The way the shop here runs is he gets his freight from Adelaide and he pays higher amount.” D. Rankine, resident Mt Eaglebeak Outstation -20 Km from Atitjere community, Team Leader with Central Desert Regional Council.

“Yes we have this tough living out on remote because you have food costs and rent going up and also health problems and fuel costs. It’s still hard if you’re employed because the costs in the store are pretty high. I’m involved in the store itself being part of the store committee. I’ve had my dealings with the store itself, being a director and learning how to look after it, what stock comes and goes, what prices there are sometimes how we try to sort it out in our own community because it’s our own store we don’t want outsiders coming in and being involved or looking after us/.. We are in the process of trying to make food cheaper. Putting difference prices on items/..They usually spend it here or if they’re wanting to go to town or for sport programs. Most of the time they’re getting a bit of food for travel then buy food in Alice Springs because it’s cheaper in the supermarkets. Sometimes I do a bit of shopping when I’m in town then travel back if I’ve got business in town.

CLC staff question: Once you have paid for fuel do you think you come out on top?

“No not really because you’ve gotta fill up the tank so say if you have just about an empty tank and you have to fill up the tank it’s already got you over \$100 bucks.” A. Petrick, Senior Ranger, Central Land Council, resident Atitjere Community

Discussion and Recommendations

A range of recommendations regarding mechanisms for addressing remote Indigenous poverty and food insecurity have been raised and repeated by a plethora of stakeholders over recent decades yet the situation remains remarkably unchanged. Many of these sensible and important proposals are captured in the potential actions put forward in the discussion paper and are, on the whole, supported by the Central Land Council. The challenge for the Strategy is to identify the priority actions needed to affect change now while a range of longer terms actions and aspirations are developed and implemented.

It is the CLC's firm view that to stem the flow of chronic illness and disease, disadvantage and early death that continues to ravage remote Indigenous communities in central Australia, income inequality and poverty must be addressed urgently through direct and targeted increases to income payments and through a focused and considered approach to real job creation. Some of these strategies that have been recommended through a range of inquiries and reports stretching back decades. This focus area is deliberately brought forward in this submission to reflect its importance to the overall goal of addressing food insecurity.

Focus Area – Policies, Practice and Governance

It is critical that national and state/territory agencies or other oversight entities are identified to take carriage of the analysis, final recommendations and implementation plan for the final National Remote Food Security Strategy. The governance of the strategy should be ongoing and supported by a clear monitoring and evaluation strategy to track progress against priority recommendations. Without this in place we are at risk of returning to the same place in a number of years with little change to the dire statistics regarding Aboriginal health and wellbeing in remote communities. The discussion paper canvasses a wide range of policy areas that fall under different departments and jurisdiction. As such any governing entity needs to reflect that broad agenda or institute appropriate reporting mechanisms. To some extent this could be achieved though the governance of closing the gap with oversight from the Coalition for Healthy Remote Stores. The critical principles that must apply to the implementation of these strategies is that they are done in genuine partnership with Aboriginal people and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health organisations consistent with priority Reform 1 of Closing the Gap

Recommendations - Policies, Practice and Governance

1. The governance of the strategy should be ongoing and supported by a clear monitoring and evaluation strategy to track progress against priority recommendations.
2. Any existing or newly formed governing entity must include a membership that reflect the broad policy agenda of the strategy or institute appropriate reporting mechanisms.
3. The critical principles that must apply to the implementation of any governing entity and the implementation of the strategy is that they are done in genuine partnership with Aboriginal people and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health organisations consistent with priority Reform 1 of Closing the Gap.

Income Support

The cash poverty rates in very remote communities in 2021 was 57.1%, an increase of 10.8 percent since 2011. This is an alarming statistic that warrants an urgent policy response from governments.

For many years, the Central Land Council has been calling for an increase to the Remote Area Allowance (RAA), in addition to the necessary increase to all income support payments. The RAA is a supplementary payment for income support recipients, introduced in 1984 to help compensate for the higher cost of living in remote regions (acknowledging that those individuals did not benefit from the zone tax offset). Two-thirds of recipients of the RAA are First Nations people.⁵ More than half of recipients live in the NT, followed by WA and QLD.⁶ The single person rate is currently only \$9.10 per week. It has only increased twice since 1984 (by a total of \$2.10 per week).⁷ Furthermore, the payment is not indexed and has therefore fallen in real value over time.

Recent analysis by Dr Francis Markham is extremely helpful in estimating a fair increase to the RAA that would adequately account for the higher costs of living in remote communities in the NT – providing ‘horizontal equity’ in our social security system.⁸ As noted above, people living in remote communities are paying around 39 per cent more for the basics. In his analysis, Dr Markham provides a preliminary estimate of adequate increases that would equalise this cost-of-living disparity for different payment recipients.

When coupled with Dr Markham’s analysis of the deep and worsening poverty rates in remote NT communities presented above, there is a compelling case for a substantial increase to the RAA as a well-targeted measure to ease cost of living pressures for those who need it most. Equal standards of living for recipients of a given payment, regardless of location, should be a policy principle that underpins our social security system.

The following recommendations summarise those made in previous CLC submissions, including the CLC submission to the *Inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia*, to the Senate Select Committee on the Cost of Living and to the Minister for Social Services in relation to the Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee.

⁵ Productivity Commission (2020) Study Report: Remote area tax concessions and payments, p.44
<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/remote-tax/report#>

⁶ Ibid, p.21.

⁷ Australian Government Guide to Social Policy Law: Social Security Guide (Version 1.316 - Released 20 March 2024) 5.2.6.30 RAA - May 1984 to present date ([weblink](#))

⁸ Dr Francis Markham, ‘The poor pay more: Why the Remote Area Allowance needs urgent attention’, 12 February 2024, published by the Australian National University Tax and Transfer Policy Institute ([weblink](#))

Recommendations – Healthy Economies

4. Permanently and adequately **increase Jobseeker and all other income support payments** to keep people out of poverty, and provide for the ongoing indexation of all payments.
5. Substantially **increase the Remote Area Allowance** to appropriately account for the higher cost of living in remote areas and set appropriate ongoing indexation arrangements. Equal standards of living for recipients of a given payment, regardless of location, should be a policy principle that underpins our social security system (see more detail at **Appendix B**).
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 - Add the eradication of poverty as an explicit focus of the Committee.
9. Require for the government to formally respond to the Committee's report (and in a timely manner and that the government's response is published).

Focus Area - Country

Aboriginal families in central Australia continue to actively hunt and forage for bush foods to supplement their diets. During COVID and when stores had limited stock during recent flood events this activity became a necessity. Unfortunately, the capacity to hunt and collect bush foods is also impacted by poverty. Many people do not own their own vehicle and are reliant on others to visit important bush tucker sites and to hunt animals. Most of these activities require fuel and costly vehicle maintenance and repairs and tyre replacements. Additionally, it is also costly to purchase and register firearms and many stores no longer stock ammunition. For Aboriginal people to

continue to access traditional foods means also ensuring people are healthy and not living in poverty.

CLC Ranger Program

The CLC ranger program is a significant employer of Aboriginal people in the CLC region and works to keep country healthy including protecting important bush food and medicine sites from weeds, fire and the impacts of cattle and other feral animals. Examples include:

- 2020-21, Arltarlpilta Ineyle rangers protected **quandong trees** from feral animals and fire by clearing vegetation and buffel grass on the Haasts Bluff land trust⁹.
- In the same period the group also surveyed Atula Station on the Atnetye Aboriginal Land Trust that was under a grazing licence. Satellite and drone images showed broad-scale damage to country, from decades of overgrazing. The CLC rangers used this information to help the traditional owners make an informed decision about the future of the licence area. The traditional owners decided to exclude a large portion of the grazing area from a new grazing licence until the land recovers¹⁰.
- In 2022-23, Walungurru, Tjakura and Kaltukatjara rangers participated in a collaborative, simultaneous tri-state monitoring event called Mulyamiji March. The event, coordinated by Indigenous Desert Alliance, focused on the Tjakura (Great desert skink, *Liopholis kintorei*), a species of cultural significance for Indigenous people, both as an important Tjukurrpa (dreaming) species and historically, **a favoured food resource**. It occurs almost exclusively on Aboriginal land. Tjakura Rangers also led a field trip at the Indigenous Desert Alliance Conference in Yulara.

The CLC Ranger Program

At May 2024, the program included 15 ranger groups funded from three sources:

- NIAA funds eight groups
- ILSC funds three groups
- ABA stimulus funds 3 groups (all casual)

There are 4 Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA's) which are a major focus of ranger program activity:

- Northern Tanami IPA
- Southern Tanami IPA
- Kaititi Petermann IPA
- Angus Downs IPA
- Central Western Desert IPA

The CLC ranger program is a significant employer of Aboriginal people in the CLC region and currently employing 150 people including 14 ranger coordinators, 5 ranger mentors, 1 coordinator of ranger program support and 86.2 FTE for rangers, lead rangers and ranger support officers (38% of rangers are women).

⁹ CLC (2022), *Ranger Report 2020-2021*, P 2

¹⁰ Ibid, p 15

Transfer of Cultural Knowledge through the Ranger Program

Rangers keep country healthy and the ranger program is also a very important vehicle for transfer of intergenerational knowledge of dreaming stories and songlines and relationships and responsibilities to country. Important knowledge is also shared about tracking, foraging, hunting and the cultural rules associated with those activities. For example:

- In 2020-21, the Tjakura rangers took Mutitjulu school students on three country camps to learn from traditional owners of the Kaṯiṯi-Peterman Indigenous Protected Area and the Uluru – Kata Tjuta National Park how they lived on country. The themed camps included:
 1. Punu –wooden tools
 2. Tjina Munu kuna (tracking animals); and
 3. Mai (Bush foods)

The students made kuḷaṯa (spears) from urtjanpa (spearwood) harvested at Kata Tjuta, and learned to spot animal tjina (tracks) and kuna (faecal scats). They were also shown how to prepare damper from tjanpi (native grass) seeds with coolamons for winnowing and grinding stones.¹¹

Ongoing Commonwealth and NT flexible support funding support for ranger programs is critical to enable them to consolidate and also extend their reach. Rangers are the eyes, ears and hands on the ground implementing management and cultural practices needed to ensure healthy country that supports important bush foods and animals, threatened and significant plant and animal species and sources of water for all Australians. The Ranger program is also the springboard supporting intergenerational learning to ensure Aboriginal people have the skills and knowledge to access country for sustenance into the future.

Aboriginal Food Production Projects and Regional Food Security Strategies

As the discussion paper identifies, it is also critically important for people living in remote communities to have access to fresh food grown locally. Many people remember the days when communities had orchards and community vegetable gardens. Now most fruit and veg is transported long distances and can still be prohibitively expensive, over packaged and lacking freshness. Community led horticulture initiatives, including Centrefarm near Alekareng and the Yirrkala Pilot farm are generating local produce as well as local training and employment. Initiatives like these have the potential to become future hubs for the production and distribution of fresh foods across a regional footprint that reduce freight costs, increases freshness, flavour and variety and also present opportunities for production and harvesting of bush foods. Maximising Aboriginal control, employment, training and economic outcomes are important requirements of future horticulture projects and regional food security strategies moving forward.

¹¹ Ibid, p23

Recommendations - Country

10. Ranger Program funders including the Commonwealth and NT Governments and the ILSC to ensure funding provided is flexible, long-term and responsive to the on-ground needs of programs e.g. includes infrastructure funding including staff housing and ranger headquarters construction and/or upgrades and vehicles and funding for critical coordination roles.
11. Governments to develop regional food security strategies that embed principals of Aboriginal community control and Aboriginal employment, training and economic outcomes particularly with respect to local and regional food production projects and enterprises.
12. Existing Aboriginal Community controlled and initiated horticulture pilot initiatives (or through genuine business partnership models that bring horticulture expertise to Aboriginal Community controlled organisations) should be supported and carefully monitored to ensure the outcomes are documented and inform future projects. Current examples include the Centrefarm Farm trials and Work Experience Pilot Pathway (WEPP) program at Alekarenge and the Pilot farm at Yirrkala which is now supplying fresh fruit and vegies to stores on the Gove Peninsula.
13. Regional food security strategies should explore opportunities to further develop local food production, warehousing and distribution hubs around these and future Aboriginal Controlled horticulture projects to reduce freight costs, diversify access to fresh fruits and vegetable and native bush foods in local community stores.

Focus Area - Housing

Adequate housing that is well maintained, cool in summer, warm in winter and not overcrowded is essential to the good health of Aboriginal families in remote communities. The CLC has welcomed the commitment from the NT and Commonwealth governments to a new \$4 billion, ten year housing partnership agreement for NT remote communities and town camps and is a signatory to the agreement alongside the three other NT land councils and Aboriginal Housing NT. It is the CLC's view that if the new agreement is to be successful in reducing overcrowding and improving health outcomes for residents, then an adequate proportion of funding will need to be allocated to refurbishment of existing housing stock, effective cyclical and preventative maintenance programs and responsive maintenance in addition to the construction of new houses. This is to ensure that all remote public housing stock meets the requirements of the nine healthy living practices¹² which have been adopted as a guiding framework for the NT Government's Our Community Our Future Our Homes repairs and maintenance program which includes:

1. **Washing people**
Ensuring there is adequate hot and cold water, taps and drainage.
2. **Washing clothes and bedding**
Ensuring the laundry tub is functional with provision for a washing machine.
3. **Removing wastewater safely**
Ensuring toilets and all drains are working.

¹² Healthabitat, Safety and the 9 Healthy Living Practices
<https://www.healthabitat.com/what-we-do/safety-and-the-9-healthy-living-practices/>

4. **Improving nutrition through the ability to store, prepare and cook food**
Ensuring the sink, taps and stove work.
5. **Reducing the negative impacts of overcrowding**
Ensuring health hardware (e.g. hot water and septic systems) can cope with the number of people living in the house.
6. **Reducing the negative effects of animals, vermin or insects**
Ensuring adequate insect screening.
7. **Reducing the health impacts of dust**
Introducing ways to limit the movement of dust to reduce the risk of respiratory illness.
8. **Controlling the temperature of the living environment**
Looking at the use of insulation and passive design to reduce health risks, particularly to small children, the sick and elderly.
9. **Reducing hazards that cause trauma**
Considering aspects of housing that can cause non-life-threatening injury

Recommendations - Housing

14. The NT Government provide a detailed response to the 2023 Review of The NTG Healthy Homes repair and maintenance program to ensure issues are identified and resolved as we move into the implementation of the new Ten Year Remote Housing Partnership Agreement

15. The Joint Steering Committee for the new Ten Year Remote Housing partnership agreement ensure a sufficient proportion of the \$4 billion housing funds are allocated to preventive and cyclical repairs and maintenance of existing housing stock. This is critical to ensuring all houses are able to meet the benchmarks for the nine-healthy living practices designed by Healthabitat and adopted by the Northern Territory Government in its New Housing design guidelines and the HealthyHomes preventative repair and maintenance contracts. In the context of remote food security this particularly relates to Healthy Living Practice 4:

‘- improving nutrition- assessing the ability to prepare and store food, making sure the stove works and improving the functionality of the kitchen.’

This outcome was not achieved under the last five year agreement and it is crucial that the new agreement strives to significantly improve performance against this measure.

Focus Area - Stores

Despite stores licensing under Stronger Futures and numerous reports and inquiries into remote food security over the years, remote store food prices continue to exceed regional centre counterparts. The disparity is highlighted in the 2023 NT Market Basket Survey Report:

- The average cost of the Current Diet Basket was more expensive than the Healthy Food Basket in all districts and all store types.
- The average cost of the Healthy Food Basket in remote stores was 40% higher than the average district centre supermarkets (in real terms that’s an extra \$293 per healthy food basket).

- Compared with 2021, the average cost of the Healthy Food Basket increased by 13% in remote stores and increased by 22% in supermarkets in 2023.¹³

The greatest cost difference recorded in recent years was an alarming 60% in 2017.¹⁴ While the report also shows that a healthy food basket is cheaper than a current food basket in remote community stores it is disappointing that the gap is just 9%.¹⁵

The persistence of the gap points to the need for urgent action to increase incomes (as per Healthy Economies recommendations above) and to also create the enabling environment for targeted subsidies that directly benefit the consumer.

In its December 2021 response to the recommendations arising from the 2020 Inquiry into Food Pricing and Food security in remote Indigenous communities, the Federal government committed to assessing the feasibility of real time price monitoring system across remote stores. At this stage we understand this system is not yet in place.

The CLC supports this system being introduced to remote NT stores as a matter of urgency. The installation of an integrated system would enable for freight or other store subsidies to be monitored in terms of their impact on food prices. It would allow for on the spot between-store comparison of pricing enabling responses including targeted subsidies and the detection of concerning trends in the sale of unhealthy products.

Store Governance

In the CLC region there are a variety of ownership and management arrangements in place including:

- 2 stores managed by Arnhem Land Progress Association (ALPA)
- 3 stores managed by Mai Wiru
- 13 stores managed by Outback stores
- 1 store managed by RMS
- 13 stores are community owned and managed
- 7 stores are privately owned and managed (including two stores in Ti Tree).

The feedback from CLC members is universally that store prices are too high (see case studies and evidence section above). Concerns are also frequently raised that some store management organisations don't do enough to support healthy local store governance. In some instances there seems to be a disconnect between the management and governance of stores and the aspirations of the community as a whole with important information about the use of store profits and perceived benefits to store directors creating issues in communities. It is the CLCs view that these issues point to the need for a transparent community development approach to the appointment of directors, the governance training of directors and the opportunity for the broader community to provide high level guidance for store management decisions.

¹³ NT Government (2023), *Market Basket Survey Summary Report*, p1

¹⁴ Ibid, p4

¹⁵ Ibid p2

Healthy Stores

Significant efforts have been made to improve the promotion of healthy foods in remote stores. Evidence shows these are largely effective but need to be constantly monitored and maintained in a context where independent stores are vulnerable to regular changes in management. This situation could be improved by negotiated partnerships with store management groups that support strong local governance and autonomy while providing the benefits of working with a store management group.

Focus Area - Supply Chains

Access to remote communities by road is essential for ensuring regular and reliable deliveries of fresh food and groceries to Central Australian remote communities. In 2022 the House of Representatives Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote indigenous communities

Recommendations – Stores

Store Governance

19. The NT Stores Licensing program support a framework for community store management that promotes, supports and monitors the health of local store governance.
20. Existing locally owned and managed stores to negotiate management partnerships with Store Management bodies that maximise local governance and control while increasing store access to training, healthy food promotion and the benefits of coordinated warehousing, freight and other associated economies of scale.
21. That store management bodies work with local communities to develop a community development approach to electing store directors that provides an opportunity for the community as a whole to elect directors but also to set broad principles and guidelines for critical store decisions including:
 - Use of store profits
 - Proportion of profits allocated to community projects and store price reductions
 - Director entitlements
19. Community owned and managed stores to be provided with independent information regarding the performance of various store management groups to enable informed decisions about store management partnership arrangements to ensure they can meet the aspirations of the community.

Healthy Stores

24. A direct to consumer, point of sale subsidy to address financial barriers and increase affordability of essential food, including fruit and vegetables, in remote areas funded by at least a 20% hypothecated tax on sugar, including all sugar-sweetened beverages, to rebalance the high cost of healthy foods against the relative affordability of unhealthy foods.
25. Advocate for an economy of scale store model increasing collective buying power of small independent or community owned stores passing on lower prices to the community.
26. Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services to be the preferred providers of public health and nutrition programs and other initiatives to address food security in Aboriginal communities.
27. Consistent guidelines or all licences remote stores that follow the recommendations of the Coalition for Healthy Remote Stores:
 - No promotions on unhealthy food and drinks
 - No unhealthy food and drinks in high traffic areas
 - No sugary soft drinks more than 600 ml in refrigerators
 - Less than 40% of refrigerator facings for sugar sweetened beverages
 - A minimum of 10 fresh fruit and vegetable varieties
 - Pricing Policy to promote healthy food and drinks and disincentives unhealthy ones.

recommended that the Commonwealth ‘investigate the need for upgradingroad infrastructure into remote communities, to improve the supply of food to remote First Nations communities.’¹⁶ The federal government responded to the recommendation by identifying road funding commitments, airstrip and flight funding and subsidies for the carriage of ‘passenger and goods such as educational materials, medicines, fresh foods and other urgent supplies.’¹⁷ In the CLC region the reported roads investment was largely limited to sealing sections of the Tanami Highway. Further funding commitments have been made by the Northern Territory Government to sealing the Santa Theresa and Maryvale roads, section of the Sandover Highway and sealing the Outback Way.

Unfortunately heavy rains and flooding in Central Australia in (most recently in 2023 and 2024) have had a very extensive impact on arterial and community roads cutting off a number of communities including Canteen Creek, Willowra, Mt Liebig, Papunya, Haasts Bluff, Ampilatwatja, Alpurrurulam, Daguragu and Lajamanu for weeks and in some cases months at a time. With store trucks unable to enter those communities, small quantities of store supplies were flown into communities with all-weather airstrips using small planes.

In its 2023 submission to the Federal Inquiry into the Implications of Severe Weather Events on the National Road Network, the NT Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics (DIPL) identified ‘that the Commonwealth roads funding to the NT reduced from an average of \$19.47 million per year from 2009 to 2014 to an average of \$16.76 million per year over 2019 to 2024’.¹⁸ This reduction in funding for roads is of concern given the increase in severe weather events we've had in the Northern Territory in the last 12 months and remote community reliance on roads for access to food and other essential goods. Relying on air freight is expensive and unreliable especially when airstrips are not all weather or where airstrip roads are also subject to flooding.

The Local Government Association NT (LGANT) submission to the same Inquiry also highlighted the dire condition of many NT roads and the exacerbating impact of recent flood events. According to LGANT’s 2021 State of the Assets Report, “roads managed by councils have a replacement cost of over \$204 billion, with \$17.8 billion of this road infrastructure rated as being in poor condition with \$16 billion rated as having poor function and \$14.3 billion considered to have poor capacity”¹⁹ and that “for the freight industry, the fragmented nature of road funding for council roads has resulted in a fragmented road network that is unable to ensure reliable and effective end-to-end access to deliver the freight task.”

¹⁶ Australian Government (2021), *Australian government response to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs report: Inquiry into Food Pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities*, p 2

<https://www.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/publications/final-govt-response-HORSCIA-report.pdf>

¹⁷ Ibid p3

¹⁸ Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics (2023), *Submission to the Standing Committee on Regional Development, Infrastructure and Transport Inquiry into the Implications of Severe Weather Events on the National, Regional and Remote Road Network*, p10

¹⁹

Without a deliberate strategy to increase local road funding and to embed a principle of community equity for road funding then the issues affecting supply chain in the NT are set to worsen.

Recommendations – Supply Chains

The Central Land Council supports the following recommendations put forward in the LGANT submission:

24. The Commonwealth and state and territory jurisdictions collaborate on the development of a sustainable road funding model for properly maintaining the local road network through better upfront investment so that it is more resilient to the effects of severe weather.
25. That the Commonwealth adopts a strong leadership role in efforts to improve disaster mitigation efforts, including supporting local governments with greater upfront investment in building more resilient infrastructure to minimise the much more substantial costs of replacing infrastructure destroyed by severe weather events.

The Central Land Council also endorses the following recommendations from the 2023 Grattan Institute report, 'Potholes and Pitfalls: How to fix Local Roads'.

26. Increase core funding to local governments with a \$600 million annual increase in the Financial Assistance Grants, and a \$400 million annual increase to Roads to Recovery funds. It should index both funds to a cost index that reflects changes in the costs that councils face, and population; and
27. establish a \$200 million per year fund to assess and upgrade local roads identified as priority freight routes, in exchange for the council providing permit access to compliant heavy vehicles
28. Ensure untied funding goes where it is needed most. The federal government should fix the distribution of the Financial Assistance Grants by allocating grants between and within states according to the principle that every council should have the capacity to provide a similar level of service to their community.