



Whose paradigm counts? An Australia-Pacific perspective on unheard voices in food and water systems

Acknowledgement of Country

This report was developed on the traditional Country of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, and we pay respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

Walgett is on the traditional Country of the Gamilaraay people, and we acknowledge the leadership and custodianship of Gamilaraay and Yuwaalaraay Elders, past and present.

Welcome

Ni Sa Bula Vinaka, Kia orana, Noa'ia, Talofa lava, Mauri, Mālō e lelei, Tālofa, Fakaalofa lahi atu, Mālō ni and warm Pacific greetings.

Introduction

Amid widespread calls to build back better and fairer

“Addressing food and water insecurity in Australia demands a considered response that privileges an Aboriginal paradigm of health and culture, including the continued connection between people and Country that has existed over many thousands of years”

Yuwaya Ngarra-li's Walgett Partnership Manager Wendy Spencer and Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service (WAMS) CEO Christine Corby¹⁴

in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the social determinants of health have never been more important. In September 2021, UN Secretary-General António Guterres is convening a Food Systems Summit (the Summit) as part of the Decade of Action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. The aim

Summary of recommendations

Based on consultations with key stakeholders, information from case studies included within this report and our research and advocacy expertise, we believe:

Organisers of multilateral summits should:

- Ensure First Nations voices are represented at all levels and in all aspects of governance structures from the earliest stages of summit conception.
- Recognise the diversity of global Traditional Knowledges and unheard voices and embed flexibility in engagement mechanisms to ensure these are captured.
- Ensure discussions of food systems include consideration of water systems as a default.

Health systems should:

- Recognise climate change and its impacts on human health in policy and practice and take responsibility for reducing their own climate footprint.

Governments should:

- Design food policy through a process of community-led policy development that recognises Traditional Knowledges and includes engagement with community leaders and Elders, and shared planning and decision making.
- Adopt a systems approach to developing policy, recognising the relationships and reciprocal links between food and water systems, the burden of non-communicable disease, climate change and equity.
- Support consumer demand for sustainable, fresh and healthy foods, and implement policies to ensure these foods are easily accessible, available and affordable.

Researchers should:

- Monitor the effectiveness of policies that aim to improve food and water systems and develop the evidence base on the impacts of implementation on equity, climate change and the disease burden.



First harvest from new water efficient beds at Walgett Aboriginal Medical Services Community Gardens 2020

of the Summit is to: 'launch bold new actions to deliver progress on all 17 SDGs, each of which relies to some degree on healthier, more sustainable and equitable food systems'.¹ Dubbed 'the People's Summit', it calls on people of the world to: 'work together to transform the way the world produces, consumes and thinks about food'.¹ Summit organisers and stakeholders developed five Action Tracks to focus discussions. The Action Tracks were designed to address possible trade-offs with other tracks, and to identify solutions that can deliver wide-reaching benefits in food systems.

As experts in food policy and Indigenous health, The George Institute for Global Health is focusing on a 'Triple P' agenda: to prevent non-communicable diseases (NCDs), protect the planet and promote equity. The George Institute sought to co-convene an Independent Dialogue (the Dialogue) that could bring together diverse voices to discuss the health, environmental and equity impacts of food and water systems as they pertain to unheard voices – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Pacific Islander peoples.

The aim of the Dialogue was to develop recommendations that can be submitted to the Summit that are reflective of community priorities in food and water systems. In pursuing this, we sought to focus our event on Action Track Two, 'Shift to sustainable consumption patterns', as it was most closely linked to the 'Triple P' agenda. However, it quickly became apparent that there were numerous barriers to community participation within the predetermined paradigm of the Summit.

The George Institute recognises the inclusion and representation of unheard voices – in this context,

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Pacific Island peoples – to be crucial to the success of any dialogue. Only through understanding and respecting what the paradigm of health and food and water systems means for different cultures can impactful actions be conceived and developed. Unfortunately, the lack of recognition or understanding of Traditional Knowledges outside of a Western paradigm in the Action Tracks meant limitations were placed on topics for discussion from the outset. This is evident by the exclusion of discussion on water systems in the Summit.

While The George Institute has focused on Action Track Two, this topic is also inextricably linked to Action Track 1 ('Ensure access to safe and nutritious food for all') and Action Track 5 ('Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress').

Unfortunately, the siloing of these topics reflects a lack of recognition of a holistic approach to food and water systems and privileging of a Westernised and colonising approach that excludes Traditional Knowledges. It also fails to consider how stakeholder perspectives can be more broadly included to recognise diversity within communities and across nations. Despite these limitations, there was enthusiasm from communities to contribute to the Summit in a meaningful way.

As such, The George Institute has aimed to facilitate a process through which community priorities, strengths and solutions are shared and heard, bringing global attention to important local issues. To ensure the inclusion of as many voices as possible and a community-led rather than a top-down approach (see box, right), a series of meetings with community stakeholders and experts were held over five months between March and July 2021. From these activities, this report and community case studies were developed for submission to the feedback process to the Summit.

This report reflects the perspectives of specific communities on barriers to reform and community-led solutions for food and water systems. It is important to remember that while there are similar experiences around food and water systems, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Pacific Islander peoples are diverse in cultures and practices and, therefore, should not be



homogenised in approaches to solutions. This report should not be taken to represent all perspectives from all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Pacific Islander peoples and communities. Rather, this report is based on our experiences and community feedback of what it takes to build successful collaborations. We hope this learning will be useful for Summit organisers and others, and can help to inform the design of future Summits.

“The COVID-19 pandemic in our region has threatened our livelihood, compounded poverty, insecurity with social and health inequities”

Gade Waqa, Head of Pacific Research Centre for the Prevention of Obesity and Non-Communicable Diseases, Fiji National University

Community-led solutions vs top-down approaches²

Community-led programs

- Community groups define the challenges and opportunities.
- Programs are coordinated by leaders, community members or community-controlled organisations from within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- There is a focus on building and strengthening capacity and skills.
- Indigenous research methodologies and decolonising approaches are utilised.

Top-down approaches

- Outside agents define the challenges and opportunities.
- Outside ‘experts’ dominate the coordination of the group.
- There is a focus on identifying and addressing weaknesses, problems or deficits.
- Quantifiable outcomes and targets are a priority.

Unheard voices in food and water systems

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Pacific Islander people’s voices and Traditional Knowledges are often missing from, or go unnoticed in, decision-making processes that profoundly impact their own communities.³ This top-down approach results in solutions that are not fit for purpose and not appropriate for specific communities and cultural contexts. Therefore, this Dialogue had three major focal points: (i) to understand and explore community experiences of food and water systems; (ii) to highlight community-



identified priorities, strengths and solutions in shifting to healthy and sustainable consumption patterns (Action Track 2); and (iii) to examine links between community priorities, strengths and solutions, and government responsibility, engagement and action.

Vulnerability of food and water systems

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Pacific Islander communities, vulnerabilities in precarious food and water systems are being exacerbated by climate change. These vulnerabilities lead to increased food and water insecurity, a key contributor to poor diets, resulting in higher rates of NCDs.

Food and water systems in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Pacific Islander communities are vulnerable to a range of environmental and geographic factors. Climate change and disaster events, including bushfires and drought in Australia and tropical cyclones, rising sea levels and a warming ocean in the Pacific, continue to expose and worsen food and water insecurities. Geographic constraints, including the remoteness and relative isolation of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Pacific Islander communities, have further limited the affordability and availability of healthier foods.^{4,5}

Community-identified food and water system challenges

Discussions with community stakeholders and experts have led to the development of the case studies, ‘Preventing non-communicable diseases, protecting the planet and promoting equity in the Pacific’ and ‘A community in action: How Walgett is redefining food systems’. From those, two key food and water security challenges were identified.

1. A shift from traditional diets has compromised food security

For millennia, the diets of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were rich in local flora and fauna, particularly native fruit, vegetables and lean animal proteins.⁶ The colonisation of Australia and the dispossession of and forced removal from Country caused a ‘nutrition transition’ away from traditional diets and disruption to food and water systems, resulting in ongoing food insecurity. Forced rations replaced traditional diets



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and included large quantities of refined grains and processed foods containing high levels of salt, saturated fat and added sugars, which has had ongoing detrimental impacts on health.⁵ Communities were prevented from accessing traditional food and water sources on Country, exacerbating hunger and food insecurity.

Pacific Island nations include a wide range of cultures and practices. However, they share similarities in that they all have relatively small populations, are in remote locations, have high costs associated with transport and communications, and have varying levels of infrastructure.⁷ They also share a reliance on subsistence agriculture, and tourism, agriculture and fishing are key sources of income and support for their economies. Traditional diets of Pacific Islander communities have been also disrupted by colonisation and dispossession, resulting in food insecurity. Extreme weather events have further exacerbated this issue in the Pacific, where the subsequent provision of unhealthy food aid after extreme weather events, including white rice and tinned meats, is relied on to prevent hunger. In these settings, urban migration increases, as local food production and productivity decreases the viability of subsistence farming.⁶ This again prevents communities from accessing traditional food sources and limits the ability to grow food. With more people migrating to urban centres and changes in traditional jobs, gender-related roles and responsibilities are changing,⁸ which has subsequent impacts on diet and health. In Fiji, for example, more women are now in the formal workforce, yet they maintain responsibility for the bulk of the care work for their families. The need to balance paid and unpaid work is increasing the reliance on convenience foods, which are often cheap but ultra-processed and lacking nutrition.



Typhoon damage to an old mangrove forest

Across the Pacific, women continue to play key roles in agriculture and fisheries sectors; however, they tend to be undervalued and underrepresented actors in agriculture and fisheries development and decision-making.⁹ This underrepresentation means that typically unheard voices in crucial industries go ignored, exacerbating inequalities.

2. High salinity groundwater has compromised the quality of drinking water and food security

The degradation of inland rivers over time, due to drought and government mismanagement, has had increasingly devastating effects on food and water security and the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Communities such as Walgett in New South Wales, Australia, have had to rely on groundwater for drinking and food production. The salinity of this water is almost double that recommended in the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines – which are based on palatability not health – and 15 times more than the amount recommended for people with high blood pressure. These unacceptably high levels of sodium can lead to dehydration and increased purchasing of soft drinks, further impacting community health. The salinity of the water in Walgett has resulted in reduced agricultural yield and destruction of soil structure within the local community garden, increasing the community's reliance on purchasing packaged, processed foods or takeaway foods that are more expensive and less healthy.⁵

Extreme weather events linked to climate change, such as tropical cyclones and rising sea levels, are contributing to increased soil salinity and contaminated drinking water in Pacific Island coastal communities. This is further exacerbated by long droughts, which make the soil less able to absorb rain, resulting in declining agricultural yields. Extreme weather events also destroy produce and farming resources, making subsistence farming untenable for local communities. Climate change is also limiting the productivity of local fishers and, therefore, increasing reliance on imported foods and food aid.⁶ It is estimated that 75% of coastal fisheries will not meet their food security needs by 2030 due to a forecasted 50% growth in population and limited productivity of coastal fisheries as a result of climate change.¹⁰

Community-led solutions

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Pacific Islander communities have identified that creating resilient food and water systems is a key priority to ensure a sustainable, secure local supply of affordable, nutritious food and safe drinking water. Creating resilient food and water systems will have the co-benefit of contributing to a reduced NCD burden. Approaches to achieving this rely on community-identified strengths and solutions and building and strengthening community capacity and skills. Community-led programs can be effective at improving food and water security, nutrition and health; they can help reverse the trend of worsening diets and increasing chronic diseases. The most effective programs adopt a multi-strategy, multi-sector approach that includes both securing and sustaining the supply of local healthy foods and access to safe drinking water.⁵ They also include Traditional Knowledges and cultural practices passed down through millennia.

Governments need to work with communities rather than perpetuating a top-down approach, ensuring involvement of community leaders, shared planning and decision-making, and appropriate evaluation procedures to guarantee that community-identified food and water system challenges are responded to and community needs are met. Government responses must also respect Traditional Knowledges and ensure they are included in food and water policy.⁵

In 2011 in Walgett, community consultations led by the local Aboriginal medical service and Elders group highlighted community concerns about water security and exemplify community-led solutions. The community engaged experts to support action, responded to public consultations and parliamentary inquiries, and had discussions with the local council and health authority to identify solutions. Community advocacy and government engagement resulted in the government installing a desalination plant to improve water quality and the local council supporting the installation of public drinking water kiosks. While the desalination plant ultimately failed due to poor planning and unsustainable disposal of concentrate waste, the drinking water kiosks are soon to be installed. This example demonstrates how the community successfully advocated to government for, and achieved, solutions to self-identified water system challenges.⁵

With support from other partners and despite the challenges faced, the Walgett community now has high-quality local fruit and vegetables available for households and the community and weekly school food programs through a sustainable, climate-resilient community



garden system. The community is also working to ensure access to safe, affordable and nutritious food through a healthy supermarket strategy.⁵ Healthy supermarket promotions negotiated by Walgett supermarket with Dharriwaa Elders Group and Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service in 2021 have led to healthier options being available to the community.

Burden of disease

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and Pacific Islander communities experience exceptionally high burdens of NCDs and premature mortality. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, NCDs are responsible for 64% of the total disease burden.¹¹ In the Pacific region, NCDs are responsible for almost 70% of deaths, of which two-thirds are premature.¹² Diet is a huge factor in the increasing burden of NCDs. Diet-related diseases, such as high blood pressure and type 2 diabetes, account for the greatest portion of NCDs both in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and in the Pacific.

A case study for change

The importance of community-led engagement, the privileging of unheard voices and the commitment to facilitate self-determination cannot be overstated.

Over the past 10 years, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Program at The George Institute has evolved from a few projects and staff to a formalised and broad-reaching program that is centred in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research methodologies and practice. Today, the program continues to expand its delivery of meaningful and ethical research, transforming the health and wellbeing of First Nations peoples and communities.⁴ This has not been easy and has required commitment from management and staff to ensure the Program has been supported and respected.

The Program operates within a collective and relational team dynamic that places Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and knowledge at the centre of the research process. This decolonised space involves unpacking colonial practices that have created



Walgett community members with UNSW water engineers and The George Institute at the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Services Community gardens 2019

inequalities and racism. Within the research space, this means questioning whose knowledge counts and, by extension, research practices, program design and policy formation.⁴

During the same period, The George Institute has worked in collaboration with Pacific Island research institutes, non-government organisations and government ministries to support the reduction of diet-related NCDs in the region. Currently, we are collaborating with Fiji National University to support the strengthening of food policy implementation in the region. This process is based on listening to community voices and synthesising community knowledge, enabling community ownership and, therefore, power to change diet-related issues in Fiji in a sustainable way.

“By working with community to understand barriers and opportunities, we can support local partners to strengthen implementation of policies that improve diets. In this way we can prevent NCDs, protect the planet and promote equity”

Jacqui Webster, Professor of Food Policy, The George Institute for Global Health

When we tried to apply this approach to the Food Systems Summit, it became clear that the processes for feedback and information gathering did not allow for us to facilitate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Pacific Islander community engagement in the timescales. A top-down, rather than a community-led approach was apparent in the Action Tracks and pathways to provide feedback to Summit organisers. There seemed to be no recognition of the importance and interconnectedness of food with water systems. In future, Summit processes would benefit from flexible approaches that recognise diverse Traditional Knowledges and communication. This includes understanding and centring the importance of connection to Country and relationality of families and communities. It also includes understanding the holistic nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's paradigm of health, which encompasses the physical, social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of not just individuals but the whole community.⁵

Decolonising Research¹³

Decolonising is the undoing of colonialism, or the undoing of domination and subjugation of one people over another. Colonisation is about power and control and, therefore, consciously or unconsciously, informs whose knowledge counts and, by extension, research practice, program design and policy formation. Decolonising involves focusing on the strengths, capacity and resilience of peoples and Traditional Knowledges that have been colonised rather than seeing them as a 'problem'.

Images courtesy of www.dharriwaeldersgroup.org.au

Summary

The George Institute recognises the inclusion and representation of unheard voices – in this context, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Pacific Island peoples – to be crucial to the success of any United Nations process. It is only through the understanding and respect of what the paradigm of health and food and water systems means for different cultures can impactful actions be conceived and developed. This report makes a series of recommendations that should be considered by organisers of the UN Food Systems Summit for future events.

“It's not just about focusing on the research, but also understanding the work environment and how it allows us to self-determine success through our own research paradigm”

Keziah Bennett-Brook, Program Lead, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Health Program

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