



FAIR AND HEALTHY FOOD FOR ALL

*A Victorian independent
food system dialogue*



SEPTEMBER 2022

SUSTAIN
the Australian food network



William
Angliss
Institute

Acknowledgement of Country, conveners and event organising team

WE ACKNOWLEDGE

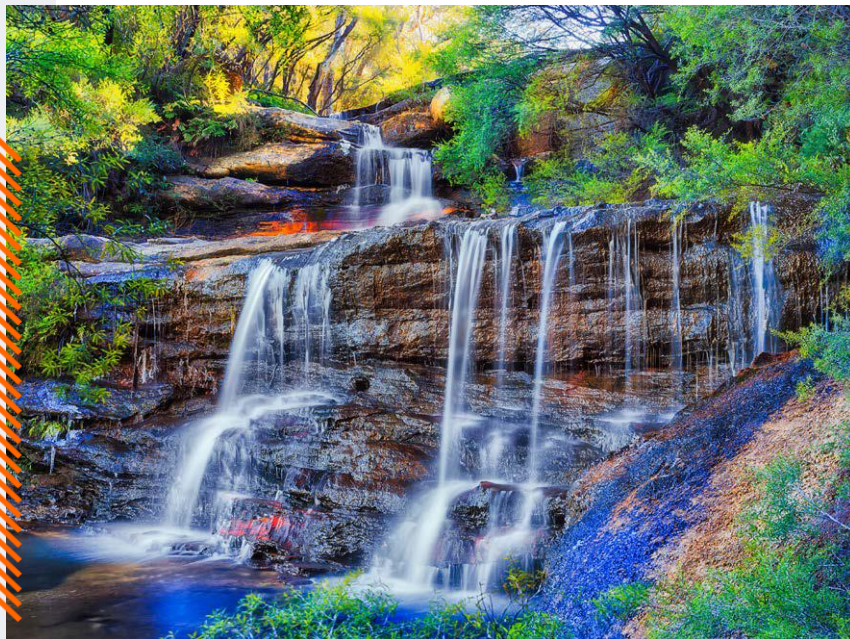
that we live and work on the traditional lands of various Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

WE RESPECTFULLY ACKNOWLEDGE

the custodianship of the Elders, recognising that they and their ancestors stewarded these lands and their diverse creatures sustainably for tens of thousands of years.

WE RESPECTFULLY ACKNOWLEDGE

that sovereignty over these lands was never ceded, that colonisation and dispossession were acts of genocidal violence, and the process of historical truth-telling that will and must lead to justice for all First Nations Peoples. The path to a better food system for all Australians must begin with the acknowledgement of this history, based on the principles of care, respect, healing, justice and regeneration.



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Contents

04

About this report

07

About the United Nations
Food Systems Summit

12

Water, Country and
Sovereignty

17

“If Country is ill, we are ill”

20

Tackling root causes, not
symptoms, of food and
nutrition insecurity

23

Youth-led food justice

25

Strengthening Food Systems
Governance at a Local Level

33

VicHealth Local
Government Partnership

35

Summary of
small-group discussions

39

Reflections from
dialogue facilitators

44

Call out corporate power
in the food system (as
though our lives depend
on it)

47

Participant feedback

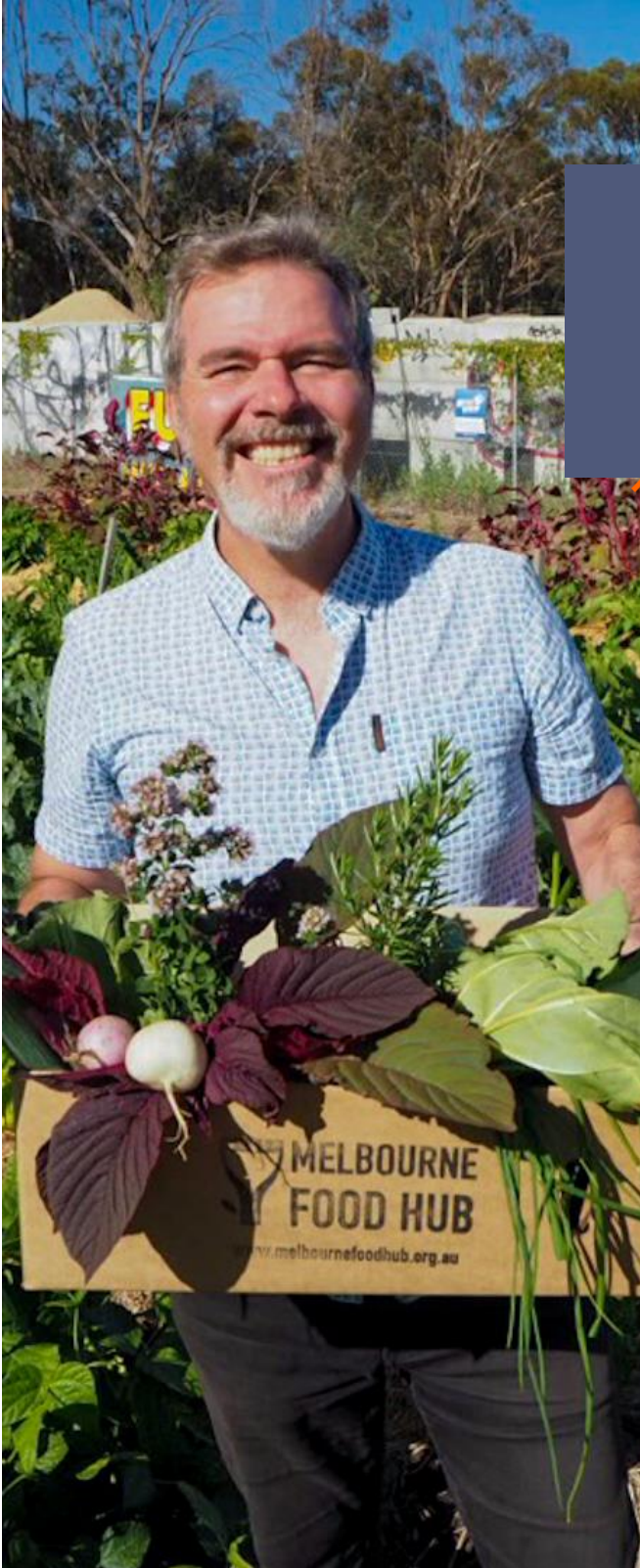
50

Links and readings
to explore





About this report



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This report summarises presentations and a series of facilitated conversations at "Healthy and Fair Food for All Summit," an independent dialogue process as part of the global process leading to the first United Nations Food Systems Summit.

Held on 27 June 2021, the all-day event was convened by partners of the Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project, 'Strengthening Food Systems Governance at the Local Level' (University of Sydney, University of Wollongong, and William Angliss Institute), along with Sustain: The Australian Food Network and the Right to Food Coalition (RTFC).

The event brought together 120 participants from across the food system. Participants were recruited through targeted emails, and the event was publicly promoted on social media and through various e-newsletters to ensure a diverse set of participants.

Together attendees explored key challenges and opportunities facing Victoria's (and other local Australian food systems) food system now and in the coming decades, along with concrete actions that needed to advance an agenda of progressive change.



The event was designed to share new food system research and initiatives as well as actively encourage discussion between participants. Invited keynotes and presenters reflected on a range of critical food system issues including First Nations food sovereignty, food security and the role of local governments in enacting positive change.

Keynote addresses by Uncle Ghillar Michael Anderson and Victorian Senator Lidia Thorpe were a highlight of the day. Other presentations explored VicHealth's new Local Government Partnership, research findings the ARC research project, youth-led food justice advocacy and the need for a right-to-food approach to food insecurity. These presentations are summarised in the report.

The event included three opportunities for small-group discussion in small break-out rooms with designated facilitators and note-takers. Each dialogue session was focused on a particular topic. The aim of the facilitated discussion groups was to understand the diverse perspectives of participants regarding the food system and to stimulate learning and exchange.

These group discussions are summarised in the report. At the end of this report, a selection of event organisers and dialogue facilitators also offer their reflections on key issues explored by participants and the implications for food system transformation more broadly.

Small group discussion topics

- 01 Key strengths and challenges of the Victorian food system
- 02 Changes needed to address key food system challenges
- 03 Implications for research, policy and practice

A breakdown of participants' age, gender and food system sector representation is summarised in Appendix 1.





About Sustain

Sustain was launched in October 2015 at William Angliss Institute through a dialogue-based event – *Democratising Food Systems* – at which 80 people explored critical issues facing Victoria’s food system through facilitated round-table discussions.

That event has guided our work and our approach over the following six years. We know that food and agricultural systems are increasingly destructive, that they are a principal cause of the most severe crises we face, but also that their transformation offers a very real promise of resolution of those crises.

As a national think-and-do sustainable and healthy food systems network, we see Sustain’s role as contributing to this necessary and urgent process of transformation. A critical aspect of this work involves bringing diverse groups of people together from across the food system, sharing research, practice and insights, building common understandings and moving ahead with proposals and initiatives for meaningful change.

Since October 2015, we have pursued this work through an extensive program of events featuring local, national and international experts, including at the biennial Urban Agriculture Forum, the Australian Community Food Hubs conference and national speaking tour, an online exploration of the world-leading Vermont Farm to Plate Plan (US), and a series of webinars highlighting local and national food systems leadership.

We have worked in collaboration with Cardinia Shire Council since 2016 on the Cardinia Food Circles Initiative, and played a leading role in the participatory creation of one of Australia’s first Community Food Strategies, endorsed by the Council in 2018. We have established and operated urban farms in Alphington and Preston and championed an agenda for the creation of a \$500 million national Edible Gardening Fund, grounded in research findings from Sustain’s national Pandemic Gardening Survey undertaken in 2020.

In the spirit of continuing to create spaces for

participatory, open and deliberative discussion and exploration of critical food systems issues, Sustain—along with the Just Food Student Collective, the Right to Food Coalition and ‘Strengthening Food Systems Governance at the Local Level’ Australian Research Council research team—convened an independent food systems dialogue for Victoria.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused immense hardship and suffering for millions of people in Australia and globally. At the same time it has revealed the fragility and vulnerability of our food systems, both through pandemic-induced labour shortages and other shocks, as well as its contribution to accelerating climate change. At the same time, this has opened a window for significant change – if civil society actors are aware and mobilised to engage in sustained advocacy for that change. This is both an opportunity and a challenge.

On that note, [Towards a Healthy, Regenerative and Equitable Food System in Victoria: A Consensus Statement](#), drafted through a deliberative process facilitated by VicHealth over 2020/21, will be a major milestone, entering the 2022 state election year.





About the United Nations Food Systems Summit



Why the Food Systems Summit?

Sustain's vision is of an Australia where no-one is hungry or food insecure, where our diets enable us all to live full and happy lives in radiant health, and where our agricultural and land management practices restore our river catchments and ecosystems to states of flourishing abundance.

Sadly, we are far from that vision today. Indeed, it can be said, without exaggeration, that our food system is not merely dysfunctional, but rather that it is killing us, and the life systems on which we depend. The latest [State of the Environment Report \(2021\)](#) reveals that many of this continent's diverse ecosystems have reached breaking point. More mammal species have become extinct in Australia over the last two centuries than any other continent, and the rate of species decline in Australia is one of the highest rates OECD countries. Land use change including mining and agriculture are primary causes. Australia has the dubious record as a global leader in species extinction, ecosystem degradation, and greenhouse emissions.



[United Nations Food Systems Summit](#)

Massive land clearing in Queensland for cattle, and fish kills in the Darling caused by over-extraction are two recent examples in a long history of destructive land and water management practices. The rampant expansion of fast food chains in outer suburbs, combined with no controls on marketing or sports sponsorship, has [contributed to a national doubling in obesity in the past decade alone](#). The pandemic has exposed major inequalities in the Australian food system, resulting in huge demand for food relief. Evidence from frontline providers in Melbourne suggested that there was a trebling in demand for their services during the first wave of lockdowns and, as we move into 2022, demand is around double what it was prior to the pandemic.

With these and many other food systems issues becoming ever more critical, the UN Food Systems Summit and the associated independent and national dialogues were timely indeed.



Purpose of the UN Food Systems Summit

The purpose of the UN Food Systems Summit was to provide an opportunity to discuss and launch bold new actions, solutions and strategies to transform the food system and deliver progress on all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), each of which relies on a healthy, sustainable, and equitable food system.

The Summit was focused on [five action tracks](#).

Action tracks

- 01** Action Track 1
Ensure access to safe and nutritious food for all
- 02** Action Track 2
Shift to sustainable consumption patterns
- 03** Action Track 3
Boost nature-positive production
- 04** Action Track 4
Advance equitable livelihoods
- 05** Action Track 5
Build resilience to vulnerability, shocks and stresses



Guiding principles

The summit was guided by [seven principles of engagement](#):

- 01 Act with urgency**
We recognise the utmost urgency of sustained and meaningful action at all levels to reach the respective 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.
- 02 Commit to the Summit**
We commit to practice what we preach personally and professionally to contribute to the vision, objectives and the final outcomes of the Food Systems Summit.
- 03 Be respectful**
Within our respective capacities and circumstances, we will promote food production and consumption policies and practices that strive to protect and improve the health and well-being of individuals, enhance resilient livelihoods and communities and promote good stewardship of natural resources, while respecting local cultures, contexts.
- 04 Recognise complexity**
We recognise that food systems are complex, and are closely connected to, and significantly impact, human and animal health, land, water, climate, biodiversity, the economy and other systems, and their transformation requires a systemic approach.
- 05 Embrace multi-stakeholder inclusivity**
We support inclusive multi-stakeholder processes and approaches within governments and communities that bring in diverse perspectives, including indigenous knowledge, cultural insights and science-based evidence to enable stakeholders to understand and assess potential trade-offs and to design policy options that deliver against multiple public goods across these various systems.
- 06 Complement the work of others**
Recognising that issues related to food systems are being addressed through several other global governance processes, we will seek to ensure that the Food Systems Summit aligns with, amplifies and accelerates these efforts where practicable, avoiding unnecessary duplication, while encouraging bold and innovative new thinking and approaches that deliver systems-level transformation in line with the Summit's principles and objectives.
- 07 Build trust**
We will work to ensure the Summit and associated engagement process will promote trust and increase motivation to participate by being evidence-based, transparent and accessible in governance, decision-making, planning, engagement and implementation. We – from member states to private businesses to individual actors – will hold ourselves accountable for commitments made with mechanisms in place to uphold this accountability.





Types of Dialogue Events

Around the world, three types of ‘dialogues’ took place in the lead-up to the summit. Dialogues offered an opportunity for diverse stakeholders to connect, broker new relationships, participate in discussions, and plan future actions.

- 01** Member State Summit Dialogues: organised by national governments;
- 02** Global Summit Dialogues: aligned with global events on major issues such as climate, environment, health, economies, humanitarian aid, and water; and
- 03** Independent Summit Dialogues: organised by individuals (or groups) to enable participation by citizens

Critiques of the Summit process

The UN Food Systems Summit was, and continues to be, the subject of several important critiques from various sectors of civil society around the world. A common critique is that it privileges the most powerful voices and actors in the food system at the exclusion of others.

For example, the Agroecology Research-Action Collective writes:



This summit has been deeply compromised by a top-down exclusion of many food systems actors and an impoverished view of whose food system knowledge matters. This exclusive approach undercuts ongoing work by farmers, farm workers, and food workers worldwide to advance transitions to justice and sustainability.

Please see below links to this and related critiques:



[Scientists Boycott the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit](#)



[The UN Summit on Food Systems 2: The Critique](#)



[People's movements to counter UN summit: call to reclaim food systems from corporate control](#)



[The UN summit on food systems took two years to plan. It's offered nothing to help feed families.](#) Michael Fakhri, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food



[The Food Systems Summit's Failure to Address Corporate Power](#)



Sustain shares the fundamental substance of these critiques. The food system is deeply unfair and unsustainable in its present form. The case for transformation is overwhelming, and this is a process that must involve and be based on a major shift in power relations.

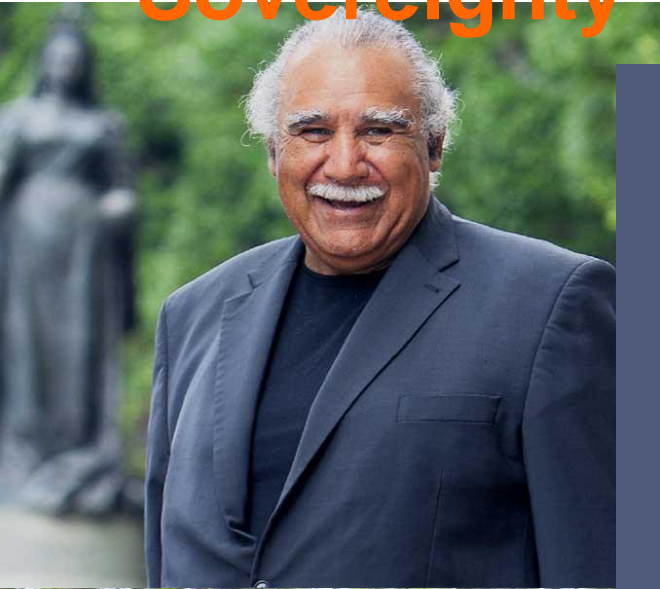
Sustain made the decision to organise and coordinate this event following discussions with several partners, mindful of these critiques and the need to take them seriously. Our goal in doing so was not principally to participate in the UN Food Summit process itself; rather, it was to continue Sustain's work of facilitating and bringing together actors across the food system for important discussions about the urgent necessity for food system transformation - in Victoria, in Australia and globally.

We believe in, and are committed to, the principles and practice of deliberative and participatory democracy, which is now threatened by growing signs of authoritarianism in many places around the world.

If we want a better, fairer and more sustainable Victoria, Australia, and world, we must work together to bring it closer into being. This begins with, and must be based on, open, inclusive and respectful conversation and dialogues; and a willingness to engage with and tackle difficult and troubling issues and questions. Participation in Independent Dialogues by people from all over Australia who represent diverse sectors shows that there is a strong appetite for these discussions.

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

Water, Country and Sovereignty



Uncle Ghillar Michael Anderson

Uncle Ghillar Michael Anderson is a Senior Law Man, Elder and leader of the Euahlayi Nation from Goodooga, New South Wales. He is the only surviving co-founder of the 1972 Aboriginal Tent Embassy and has been an activist for more than 50 years. Uncle Ghillar was taught Euahlayi customs and traditions through his people's sacred ceremonies and an expert in Aboriginal astronomy.

Uncle Ghillar generously shared his reflections about the food cultures of First Nations peoples and the centrality of water to Country, sovereignty, culture and health.



When the creators came and created our society, we—the Euahlayi, the Gomeri and the Wiradjuri—were the same skin groups, and those four skin groups all connected to an ecosystem. Within that ecosystem – everything that lives within that single system – is family. In our case, we have the Nyungar, the Kurrajong tree. That's the mother of that ecosystem, and it grows on rocky ridges and soil. Within that system, we have all the food we need. Not only do the humans have a relationship, but all the different plants, animals and birds and fish where we connect down to the rivers.



Ghillar Michael Anderson, Credit: Euahlayi Peoples Republic , www.euahlayipeoplesrepublic.mobi
Euahlayi Country, Credit: Euahlayi Peoples Republic , www.euahlayipeoplesrepublic.mobi

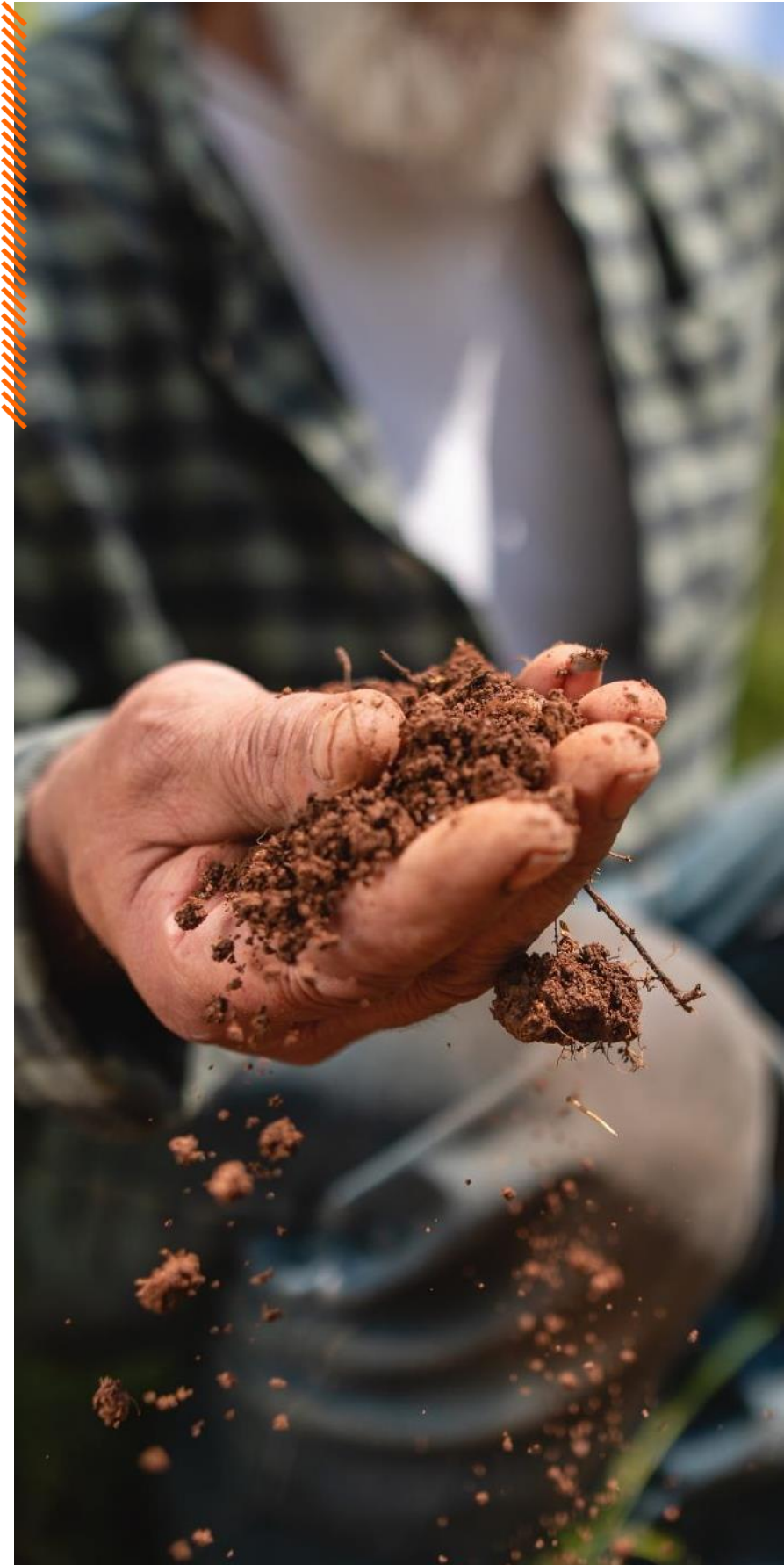


Within that system, we're generally not supposed to eat animals and birds that are related to us as part of that ecosystem. It's a conservation method that maintains our population and our numbers. It's the same as the grasses; it's the same as the fish. We have the neighbouring clans. They have a system with different animals, birds and vegetation.

Through these systems, we managed to live a sustainable lifestyle, so that we're not all farming one area, but we move around. Because our food can only be harvested in a short window of 2-3 weeks, you need to make sure that you're there at that place at that time. Over the thousands of years we've been here, we understand how that works. We didn't have to till the soil, because nature provided everything that we needed. It's a wonderful system, if we could only get back to it.

Nowadays, my people are looking at how we can plant those species in a particular area. In this modern day that we're forced to live in, we can't get to all those places where those food are growing naturally. We have to germinate them in our own areas and increase the numbers so we do have access to them at certain times.

We have eight cycles or seasons. Sometimes you're not eating plants and fruit because they're not there, and you're living on fish, birds or meat, such as echidna or goannas. We have a great variety in our diet, and it's all sugar-free, which is a wonderful lifestyle.





Uncle Ghillar gave the audience an opportunity to ask questions.

What are the major challenges to the health of waterways, and what are the changes do we need to make?

I come from the Barka (Darling River). We call the Barwon-Darling – that stretch from Mungindi, Queensland border town down to Bourke – the Garwah (Big River). There is also the Dharriwaa, which is now pronounced as Narran, which goes down to a RAMSAR-registered site, which belongs to us. These are major breeding grounds for both native and introduced species of birds.

Unfortunately, the cotton industry is doing so much damage to this system. The amount of water they are taking out of this system is extraordinary and interfering with the life of our rivers. Out here in the west where we don't have big rainfall – and where industry are doing mass land clearing – they are knocking down all our trees and terraforming it to make it grow cereal grains like wheat or barley. It doesn't work; you might have two or three good years, but then you're in drought again.

They don't understand the cyclical programs of weather patterns in this country. They don't even look at the historical and meteorological data to see the patterns of how rain falls. People need to look at the *NSW Conversation and Biodiversity Act*. It is a carte blanche to destroy Country and ecosystems for the benefit of growing cereal grains.

There is a clause in the Act that basically says that, if after five years industry hasn't made any money, then they can apply for money from a \$75 million fund the government has put aside to 'rewire' the country. Part of this farming methodology is to put up Grade A 5-foot fences called 'cluster fences' around properties to stop the migration of native animals. They are killing them in the thousands. In Queensland, there are large numbers of goannas and echidnas dying because some farmers were electrifying the bottom of their fences so the animals couldn't get through. You've got carnage going on out here. It's ecocide.

It's really hurting us spiritually and emotionally because we are seeing our native animals, our totemic animals that we are related to, die and our native plants being erased from the ecosystem. That's our native food.

It would be great if the public and researchers got involved and ran some campaigns to stop this. They need to tell our government: "This has to stop because it is madness!"



The concept of 'solastalgia' describes the psychological impacts that our changing environment has on its people. [A study was done with older farmers in the Hunter Valley](#). There were acquisitions of many farmlands by the big coal corporations. The farmers that didn't sell out watched Country around them change over 10-20 years. The farmers who sold out went back to look at the country and see what had happened where their farms once were. They couldn't recognise it; it had completely changed. This study examined the mental harm that this caused to farmers. These are non-Aboriginal people who were born and raised on these farms: older ones in their 70s or 80s. If that's happening to non-Aboriginal people, you can imagine the destructive impacts – the psychological, emotional, spiritual impacts – when we see these things changing around us.

Solastalgia describes the pain, heartache and mental harm that comes from seeing the devastating harm to the environment around us. Mental harm to a group - deliberate or otherwise - is very serious and is an element of genocide. Australia gets away with it because it does not have laws against genocide.

“ It's really hurting us spiritually and emotionally because we are seeing our native animals, our totemic animals that we are related to, die and our native plants being erased from the ecosystem. That's our native food.



What opportunities are there to produce Indigenous foods on your Country?

We have ten quandong trees on our property here. The house where I am living is right on our river, the Bokhara River. That's an Indian word for river, not an Aboriginal word. Our land is here, and we've got water, thank goodness, in our tank now. There's 100,000 acres here that are natural; there is no area that has been cleared; it's all native vegetation. We have all those native trees so we can propagate a lot of stuff here and grow. Fortunately, our native trees and fruits plants don't need much water. In fact, when we had the bad drought, these trees were so brightly green. The grasses were gone, but the trees were there. We had food, and the trees were feeding birds as well. Some of our native animals were dying of thirst because they were stuck out in the different paddocks, but I opened all the gates and let them roam.

We are now looking at growing all that stuff and increasing the production. We have a beautiful thing here, which is the natural sugar; it's not that sweet, but it's sweeter than some of the sugary plants, and it's high in vitamins C, D, and E. This is what sustained us. We didn't have the fats from sugars on our people. That's why we were lean. When you look at some of those older photograph of our Elders they were not very fat; it wasn't until they started eating that white fella sugar like jams, flour, bully beef that you started seeing obesity rise in our old people on those missions. On the missions, they were sedentary, and they couldn't move around. Here you have to move around and walk around.

If we go back to that natural diet and we can develop our Country the way we want to, then I think we can create our own industry by living with nature. It's all organic and will change the world.

We have these grasses that are starting to come back now in the last eight months. Throughout 2021, we have had rain every month. Even if it's only 10-20mm, it keeps the life and moisture in the soil. We are back to a normal monthly average in the last eight months. Whereas, in the last 10 years, we had all our yearly rain – about 300-400mm – in a period of three months and then the rest of the year was dry. But this year, it is back to that normality:

a bit of rain every month. That's keeping our country absolutely divine. Being able to go out there and look at nature, and see the animals breeding and the birds coming back, like our bush turkey, Wagun. They are starting to breed again on Country.

So there is this revitalisation; but the question is how long will it go on for? We know that in this modern age, everything seems to be going in a crazy cycle and we don't understand it.

We do register it with our birds, when we see the birds starting to disappear from our area. We start seeing grasses not growing, and trees wilting. When we look at the different plants along the side of the river, that tells us all those things that our scientists tell us: that there are weather changes coming and unfortunately get ready because we aren't going to be here for a while.

When I was growing up, we spent so much time on the river and out bush. They taught us all these things. It's by observation. Every time you're travelling around you have to look at the grasses, the trees, the wilting, the birds, and you look for certain behaviour in the animals. If those things are changing, then get yourself ready! Over the last 20 years now, I've been able to register these changes...the memory comes back, you never lose the memory.



Uncle Ghillar ends his address with an invitation to attendees:

“ By the way, if you want to come bush one day, just drop a line and drop in!



KEYNOTE ADDRESS

“If Country is ill, we are ill”



Senator Lidia Thorpe

Lidia Thorpe is a Gunnai, Gunditjmara and DjabWurrung politician, businesswoman and activist. She is a Senator for Victoria, representing the Australian Greens and is the spokesperson for First Nations, Justice, and Sport. Lidia is the first Aboriginal Senator to represent Victoria.

My ancestors have lived sustainably on Country for over 60,000 years. Country has nurtured us in every aspect. It is in us, we are made of it. We belong to it.

But now, under the system imposed by colonisation, my people are the most likely in this country to run out of food. My people experience food insecurity and go hungry, particularly those in remote communities, where it is also hardest to access healthy and quality food.

How can it be that those of us who still live on Country have the least access to food, when we managed to feed ourselves healthily for thousands of years?

In 2020, a parliamentary inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities showed how food supply, pricing, low wages, weather patterns, access to electricity, transport and cooking facilities all contributed to this food insecurity.

We definitely need to look at all these issues. We also need to look at the inquiry's recommendation for local food production to be increased, through community-led initiatives.

It is important that we reconnect with Country - it is an important part of our overall health and wellbeing. Access to traditional foods would provide important nutritional value and at the same time strengthen connection to Country and our health and wellbeing. We also need to restore land and fishing rights to First Nations communities.



But food insecurity and resulting health challenges are not just something concerning remote communities. 75% of First Nations people live in urban settings, and one in five of them experience food insecurity. One of five! That's pretty much someone in every family!

The main issue here is that people run out of money to buy food before the next paycheck comes around. It is incredibly important that we make sure that everyone - and I don't just speak of First Nations people here - has enough money to live and to live healthily and well.

When you can't afford food, it is even harder to afford healthy food, which is incredibly expensive in this country. It is so much cheaper to buy hot chips than to buy fruit and vegetables. We got something fundamentally wrong here.

So the income insecurity or insufficient incomes, which are themselves part of the stark inequalities my people have been pushed to experience, then lead to more inequality.

Because of colonisation, land dispossession, and the attempts to destroy our cultures, my people are pushed to experience a burden of disease 2.3 times that of non-First Nations people in this country, with chronic disease such as cardiovascular disease being of particular concern, but also higher mortality rates and shorter life expectancy. It is important that we provide good quality and preventative healthcare in a culturally safe way to address this. First Nations community-led health organisations have shown to do this most effectively.



Lake Condah, Budj Bim heritage area. Author: Tyson Lovett-Murray © Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners. Source: UNESCO



But I think the reasons for food insecurity and health concerns go well beyond those I mentioned, and that we need to think much bigger. It is important that we come back and reflect on what nurtures us.

For First Nations people, health is not just something that concerns the body, but includes our emotional and mental wellbeing, and the wellbeing of all other living beings and Country as well. We are all connected. If Country is ill, we are ill. So it is important that we think about our practices regarding Country: are we caring for it or are we exploiting it?

Looking at the colonial and capitalist legacies we live with today, it is clear to me that there is a disconnection between us and Country. We exploit Country, just to produce goods that are cheap and convenient. And it makes us sick. And it makes Country sick.

We have a responsibility to look after not just ourselves, but the whole community, and future generations. This includes taking action on climate change, which is already disproportionately impacting First Nations communities.

Our food production systems such as huge monocultures, excessive use of pesticides and herbicides, GMOs, logging and so much more are all based on exploiting Country for short-term profit and contribute to the decline we see in our environment, and to global heating.

I believe that, when talking about fair and healthy food for all, we need to look at the whole system, and we need to put First Nations voices and knowledge front and centre, especially our Elders, from whom we can learn from so much.





PRESENTATION

Tackling root causes, not symptoms, of food and nutrition insecurity

Vivien Yii

Right to Food Coalition

The Australian Right to Food Coalition (RTFC) is a community coalition comprising health and community workers, academics, activists and emergency food relief organisations. The coalition was founded in 2014 to advocate for radical change to the way that food insecurity is conceptualised and addressed in Australia.

We believe that access to healthy food is a human right, and that all levels of government have an obligation to 'respect, protect and fulfil' this right (in the language of human rights). There is increasing acknowledgment globally that access to food must be recognised as a human right in order to receive the attention and achieve the urgent food system transformation that is needed. Lack of food access has lasting impacts on physical and mental health and wellbeing, as well as indirectly but profoundly affecting educational outcomes, social participation, engagement in training and employment – in short, the ability to participate fully in life.

RTFC works to improve public policy to ensure the right to food for all. We believe that food insecurity is a political, economic and social problem. It cannot be eradicated by relying on charitable food relief nor through technological solutions that increase food production when the issue remains people's inability to access safe, healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food. In the absence of national food plans or any comprehensive strategy to address this key human right, the only change we will see is growth in the charitable food sector.



The recent COVID-19 pandemic provides a window into current perceptions of food security. Within weeks of the disruption to normal life caused by the pandemic, journalists and TV crews were visiting food kitchens and talking to emergency food relief staff, showing how drastically the chaos caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was affecting food security. At this time, food insecurity was affecting not only those who were used to living life on the 'breadline', but whole new cohorts of people who had lost jobs and were shocked to find themselves suddenly dependent on food relief.



The COVID-19 pandemic exposed a paradox – when there is a crisis, such as an economic downturn, we are not surprised to see food access used as the signifier for the pain experienced in society by those who are vulnerable. We are shocked (again) to learn of people who cannot feed their kids, people who have to skip meals and scrape by on cheap and unhealthy food. But the moment the crisis is over, the issue seemingly disappears. However, RTFC members and supporters know this is not the case. Demand for food relief was unprecedented before the current crisis. The people most in need of a good diet continue to have the least access to it.

RTFC believes that we cannot address a problem in an effective and holistic way, if we do not know its dimensions. In Australia, there is no national standard or system to collect detailed information about the levels of food insecurity experienced in this country. The broad figure of around 4-5%, nationally, hides levels tens of times higher in some populations and enables Australia to claim that that there is not a problem with food insecurity.

That is why first in the list of key demands of RTFC is:

01

To institute regular, Australia-wide collection of comprehensive information on food insecurity so we can understand the true extent of those at risk and who regularly experience food insecurity.

02

Secondly, **we believe that the people with the expertise and solutions are the people experiencing food insecurity.** We endeavour to foreground the experience of individuals who have, at any time, been in this position. We work closely with those accessing and providing food relief, carrying out research, networking, publishing blogs and carrying out other advocacy activities to share their stories and experiences and to boost their influence.

03

Thirdly, **we believe that where you live should not dictate potential for food security.** In Australia, there are wide disparities in access to healthy food, most particularly in remote Aboriginal communities. This is not acceptable. Everyone in Australia should be able to count on being able to access affordable and healthy food no matter where they live.





RTFC has always been interested in exploring the avenues available to pursue the advocacy demands of our members, and determine which may have the greatest potential in terms of provoking, promoting, and developing better policy frameworks to uphold the right to food. Researchers linked to RTFC – Dr Rebecca Lindberg, Liza Barbour and Dr Stephanie Godrich – recently completed a key piece of work to further this discussion. Through in-depth interviews with thirty practitioners with extensive experience in food security and public health, they explored the value of using a right-to-food framework and language. They identified four key roles for a range of stakeholders.

- 01 Governments to implement policy and plans to ensure the right to food
- 02 Non-profits to represent and advocate for community needs
- 03 The tertiary sector to research framing of food security including use of human rights frameworks
- 04 Legal professionals to assist in using the correct human rights language and mechanisms and to integrate food security into broader constitutional rights and for citizens to hold governments to account

The research also concluded more training was needed for community workers in how to use human rights as a framework. It suggests that a more readily accessible legal mechanism to use could be the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Goal 2, Zero Hunger, which Australia reports on regularly.

RTFC is currently working on further research to compare the potential for using human rights and/or SDG frameworks to continue our work to develop public policy that will guarantee the right to food for all. Such important work is one of many actions needed to address the growing concerns of food insecurity in Australia today. RTFC will continue to advocate for the right to food to be recognised in Australia so that we can address the root causes, not just the symptoms, of food and nutrition insecurity and ensure that every person has reliable access to enough safe, nourishing and culturally appropriate food.





PRESENTATION:

Youth-led food justice

Amy Tacey and Savannah Supski
Just Food Collective

Just Food Collective (JFC) is a movement centred on passionate young people who use their love and knowledge of food to work towards the transformation of the food system into one that is both participatory and just.

The Collective was founded in June 2021 by Bachelor of Food Studies students at William Angliss Institute (Melbourne). Spearheaded by Dr Kelly Donati and Dr Nick Rose, the Bachelor of Food Studies has given us - a small cohort – an unwavering and profound exposure to the challenges of the food system, from both historical contexts and our current corporate food regime.

What we felt was missing from the degree was a practical application of our knowledge. We wanted a way to fuel the passion we had gained from subjects like 'Food Movements and Social Change'. This would be our opportunity to step into the existing food system and find a way to make meaningful contributions. Six principles will guide JFC members when collaborating with partner organisations and inform the evaluation of our projects.



Just Food Collective founders (from right to left): Patrick McMillan, Savannah Supski, Amy Tacey, Jay Fong and Carol Perdigao

Six principles of the Just Food Collective

01 Sustainability

03 Systemic approach

05 Conviviality

02 Wellbeing

04 Collective action

06 Youth leadership



Evaluation will enable us to consider what we did not achieve, what went wrong along the way, and of course, how we succeeded. This evaluation process is something that we will be making publicly accessible on our [website](#) and will be entirely transparent. This transparent process is something that we, the Collective, feel is missing from organisations in our food system. If transparency were to be standard practice, new collectives would have the privilege of seeing both success and loss as key mechanisms to move toward a healthy and sustainable food system that tackles systemic inequities.

Just Food Collective brings a youth-led focus to the already strong and diverse landscape of highly passionate impactful food system-related organisations in the Melbourne context. We want to emphasise the importance of, and amplify the voices of students and young people who are working in, or about to enter, the food system – young urban farmers, qualified chefs, and tourism/events/ hospitality students who are soon to enter the food industry.

We have been meeting with Flourish Cardinia where we participate in capacity building workshops so that we can further understand our place within this community food system sphere. We aim to fill this Just Food Collective-sized space with meaningful engagements and education. For this reason, we have recently applied for a grant from Sustainable Table for a critical workshop series aimed at high school and tertiary education students focussing on six themes that will seek to tackle food waste, give light to food insecurity, and provide the platform for Traditional Owners to speak on Indigenous food sovereignty, among other themes.

The opportunity to contribute to the working group for the Fair and Healthy Food for All: Victorian Independent Food System Dialogue was invaluable as a preliminary exposure to the myriad of grassroots and research bodies conducting food systems work across Australia. We had the ability to join conversations in planning meetings about the structure of the event with regard to efficiency, engagement, and inclusivity. We gained significant insight into the workings of producing multi-stakeholder events and how they can be organised to best engage an audience. Through plenary discussions and breakout groups, organised by one of our own members, we were at once attendees, witnesses, contributors, and facilitators. These discussions and breakout rooms echoed what we had learnt through our degrees so far: the community food system is vast, with many different actors who are incredibly busy (and sometimes burnt out), but consequently this means there is a communication bridge yet to be built. This dialogue showed how beneficial it would be if Victoria (or all of Australia) had a Food Policy Council, whereby each community food system organisation could collaborate and work together collectively, rather than separate actors working alongside one another.





PRESENTATION

Strengthening Food Systems Governance at a Local Level

Belinda Reeve and Amy Carrad

ARC research team

Beginning in 2019, the Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery project aimed to investigate the role of LGs and communities in creating a healthy, sustainable, and equitable food system.

BACKGROUND AND PROJECT AIMS

Local government (LG) is the lowest tier of government in Australia's federal system, with over 500 LGs in addition to six state and two territory governments. LG is created and empowered by state legislation and is often thought of as acting only on "rates, roads and rubbish". LG is the closest tier of government to local communities, giving them unique insights into community needs, as well as the ability to introduce local-level, targeted measures.

Some Australian LGs have drawn on these powers and functions to introduce innovative policies that aim to contribute to a healthy, sustainable, and equitable food system, such as Moreland City Council's *Food System Strategy*, which was introduced in 2017 and includes measures spanning community food production, healthy food procurement policies, and hosting educational events to increase food and nutrition literacy.

ARC RESEARCH TEAM

Dr Belinda Reeve

University of Sydney Law School

Dr Nick Rose

William Angliss Institute

Professor Karen Charlton

University of Wollongong

Dr Amy Carrad

University of Wollongong

Dr Ikerne Aguirre-Bielschowsky

University of Sydney

Lizzy Turner

University of Sydney

However, these policies remain relatively rare, and the extent of LG action on food systems tends not to be comprehensive or sustained. While much attention has been paid to how governments at state and national levels can influence food systems, less is known about the role of Australian LGs in addressing health, sustainability, and equity challenges posed by contemporary food systems.

KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 01** How (and why) did LGs create food systems policies?
- 02** How did LGs implement policies "on the ground"?
- 03** What were the barriers and enablers of policy development and implementation?
- 04** What supports would LGs need to do more to address food systems issues?



Using a multi-disciplinary approach, the project analysed policies and initiatives developed by LGs and civil society organisations in New South Wales and Victoria that aim to improve food system functioning. The project also identified barriers to and enablers of LG and civil society organisation action on a healthy, sustainable, and equitable food system. The research findings will inform recommendations for policy and legislative reforms to empower LGs and communities in responding to food system challenges at the local level.

The following section of this report provides a summary of the first two phases of the ARC project: the policy mapping, and LG case studies. A comprehensive report on Phase 1 of the project is summarised on the following page and can be found on the [project website](#).



RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 01** Identify policies directly concerned with food system issues such as healthy eating, and “whole-of-government” documents that include objectives or actions related to creating a healthy, sustainable and equitable food system
- 02** Evaluate LG policies against a framework of recommendations for LG action on creating a healthy, sustainable, and equitable food system
- 03** Conduct comparisons between LGs in NSW and Victoria, and between metropolitan and non-metropolitan LGs
- 04** Identify key leverage points for improving food system policy-making at the local level.

The ARC project comprises four phases:

- 01** Mapping NSW and Victorian LG policies concerned with creating a healthy, sustainable, and equitable food system, and conducting a survey with these LGs
- 02** Case studies of food system policy making and implementation by LGs in NSW and Victoria
- 03** A survey of civil society (non-government) organisations involved in food system governance
- 04** Case studies of civil society organisations involved in food system governance that have a strong connection or a significant degree of interaction with LG.



Phase 01

Mapping LG policies that contribute to a healthy, sustainable, and equitable food system



The first phase of the project systematically mapped the extent of LG involvement in food system issues through an analysis of policies, including any dedicated food system policies.

Policy and strategic documents related to food system issues were collected from the websites of all LGs in New South Wales (NSW) (n = 128) and Victoria (n = 79) between July 2019 and June 2020. These policies were then analysed against a framework of recommended LG policy actions to create a healthy, sustainable, and equitable food system. This Framework included domains encompassing Health and Wellbeing, Sustainability and Environment, Economic Development, Food Waste, Food Quality and Safety, Social Policy, and Planning Frameworks.

A total of 2,266 documents were included in the analysis, which identified 13 dedicated food system policies.

Most actions were scattered throughout various non-food specific policies. Relevant excerpts from the 2,266 documents we analysed can now be found in the Australian Local Food System Policy Database, which can be found on the [project website](#).

The main findings from the policy mapping, namely, the Framework recommendations for which the greatest and fewest LGs were taking action, and the most significant differences between NSW and Victoria, and between metropolitan and non-metropolitan LGs are presented in Figure 1 (p28).

These findings will provide LGs with an understanding of the range of food system policy actions already at their disposal, as exemplified by those Framework recommendations for which many LGs are already taking action.





Reflection from Dr Amy Carrad

“ In the world of academia, people often are caught up focusing on journal impact factors. Presenting the findings of this research during the Dialogue felt like I was having a lot more ‘impact’. The organisers’ ability to bring a large number of diverse yet relevant stakeholders into the room allowed us to disseminate our research findings to and connect with more people than we may otherwise have been able to. I am hopeful that this research will be a useful advocacy tool for passionate people working within or with local government to take steps toward developing food system policies/strategies in collaboration with their communities.



[Download image below via this link](#)

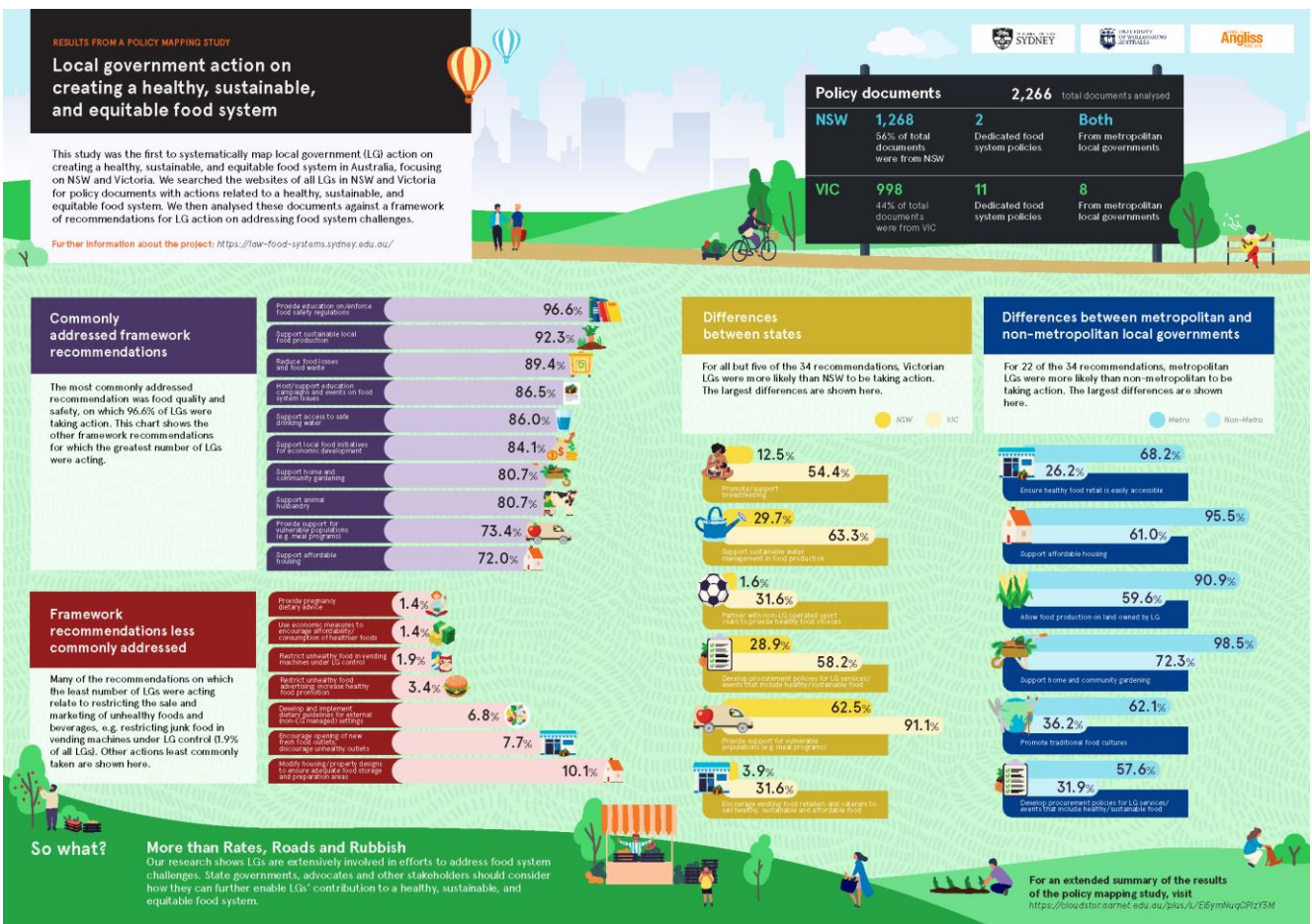


Figure 1: Local government actions on creating a healthy, sustainable and equitable food system



The findings also point to three key opportunities for enhancing LGs' involvement in addressing the human health and environmental challenges posed by contemporary food systems:

- 01** Systems-based, joined-up policy bringing together the work already done by LG departments into a cohesive strategy
- 02** Legislative change from state and federal government to produce a mandate and resources for LG to be better positioned to act on food system issues
- 03** State policy frameworks (in NSW) to achieve equal activation across states

The researchers make the following recommendations for 'next steps' for local governments, other levels of government, researchers, and other stakeholders:

01**Local government**

Strategise for joined-up dedicated food system policy, embed food into all policies, and learn from what other LGs have done.

02**State and federal government**

Demonstrate leadership by adopting food system policies (that relate to each other and provide framework for LG action), recognise the diverse work LGs are already undertaking, and provide ongoing funding opportunities for LG.

03**Researchers**

Explore barriers and enablers to policy development and implementation (see below summary of presentation by Lizzy Turner), policy effectiveness ("what works?"), and cohesion between local, state and federal levels.

04**Other stakeholders**

Support LG in advocating for change at other levels of government, and activate/continue partnerships with LG that enhance your work and theirs.



Phase 02

Case studies of six exemplar LGs



The first phase of the ARC project revealed ‘what’ LGs were doing in relation to food systems, but not ‘why’ and ‘how’. Thus, the second phase built on the first by exploring the processes involved in, enablers of, and barriers to food system-related policy development and implementation.

The researchers identified six LGs (three from Victoria and three from NSW as “best practice” examples of local food system policy-making, using the ARC project’s policy mapping study, summarised above, and also to represent different LGA sizes, degrees of socioeconomic advantage, and geographical locations (urban, peri-urban, regional). Some but not all LGs had dedicated food policies; Gwydir Shire Council was a unique example of a local food initiative led by community members, one of whom subsequently worked for the Council. Two researchers ran focus groups with each individual LG, involving between two and five staff who were directly involved in the LG’s food system policy initiatives.



VICTORIA

01



02



03



NEW SOUTH WALES

04



05



06





The findings of the case studies offer practical insights into the experiences and achievements of LGs concerning local food system policy development and implementation. Findings included critical motivations, barriers and enablers that shaped the work of LGs in supporting healthy, sustainable, and equitable local food systems:

01

Common motivations

for policy development included: reducing rates of food insecurity, protecting agricultural land for local food production, mitigating climate change through reducing food-related emissions, improving community health, and reducing food waste.

02

Common barriers

to policy development and implementation included: the lack of a mandate from state government to act on food systems, lack of funding, lack of supporting research and data, internal governance.

03

Common enablers

of policy development and implementation included: funding, the Victorian government's health and wellbeing legislative mandate, prioritisation of food issues by LG staff, collaboration between multiple LGs, a dedicated staff member, and community demand for action.

The findings highlight the following opportunities for strengthening the viability, impact and long-term sustainability of local food system policy initiatives:

- 01** Legislative change by state and federal governments to create a food systems mandate for LGs, supported by ongoing funding, state-level coordination and resources.
- 02** Regional partnerships that allow LGs to scale up, with improved sharing and use of resources.
- 03** Improved availability of research to inform and provide a rationale for local food system policies, providing locally-relevant data to support grant applications, and guide decision-making.





Reflections from Lizzy Turner

“ As an early career researcher, the opportunity to speak with focus group participants gave rich insights into the practical experiences and achievements of LG staff who worked to support healthy, sustainable, and equitable food systems. Making sense of my position and role in shaping food systems was further enhanced by the opportunity to share findings with a kaleidoscope of stakeholders across the food systems sector. The study’s findings indicate what many LGs have known for a long time: that LGs play a critical role in strengthening local food systems. In the face of Anthropogenic climate change and food insecurity, it is my hope that the research aides the continuation and expansion of this work.

The research makes the following recommendations for state and local governments:

01

State government:
Streamline food system responses including data collection, a food systems legislative mandate including a potential NSW equivalent to Victoria’s Health and Wellbeing mandate (*Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008*), and inclusion of health, wellbeing and other food-related issues in state planning schemes.

02

Local government:
Long-term commitment to food system initiatives with supporting funding, coordination and dedicated staff, and an evaluation framework built into food system policy from the outset.



PRESENTATION:

VicHealth Local Government Partnership

Stephanie Kilpatrick

Policy Manager, VicHealth

Councils are at the heart of community health and wellbeing, and well-placed to understand local priorities that can make the difference for effective health promotion. Their role in decision-making and delivery of strategic policy and planning, community services and facilities at the local level is fundamental to creating places where children and young people can thrive.

VicHealth has established this Local Government Partnership with 16 fast-track councils to address local factors that directly affect the daily lives of children and young people and their opportunities for health and wellbeing. Through the course of the partnership, VicHealth will seek opportunities to expand the program into new communities.

The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted that children and young people aged 0–25 are more vulnerable to inadequacies in the food system, have inadequate access to suitable physical activity opportunities, and have inadequate exposure to suitable social and physical environments that enable social connection.



All Victorian councils develop 4-year Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans. They are a key lever in enabling councils to provide children and young people with opportunities that give them the best start in life.

This local government partnership model is informed and shaped by the discussions and collaboration with councils across Victoria. As part of the partnership, councils will receive enhanced support to develop and deliver action on children’s and young people’s health and wellbeing through their Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans for 2021–2025. All 79 Victorian councils will have access to a range of evidence-based health promotion modules, providing them with the building blocks for effective change in their communities.



The partnership model will take a holistic approach, focusing on and providing support in four key areas, which councils identified were key in achieving sustained change and in improving the health and wellbeing of children and young people in their communities:

- 01** Funding and capacity building to strengthen local workforce
- 02** Best-practice health promotion modules to inform local government action
- 03** Collaboration with expert partners via a coordinated and localised approach
- 04** Data and monitoring support and assistance to capture data for evaluation of their Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans

This support is being directed toward communities who need it most. We have prioritised those who already face greater barriers to reaching their full health potential because of circumstances such as income, cultural background, gender, age or location. We will work closely with our fast-track councils to embed health promotion policy and practices with a focus on stable, long-term goals and support to effect local change and better health and wellbeing.

Information about the Local Government Partnerships modules can be found [here](#).

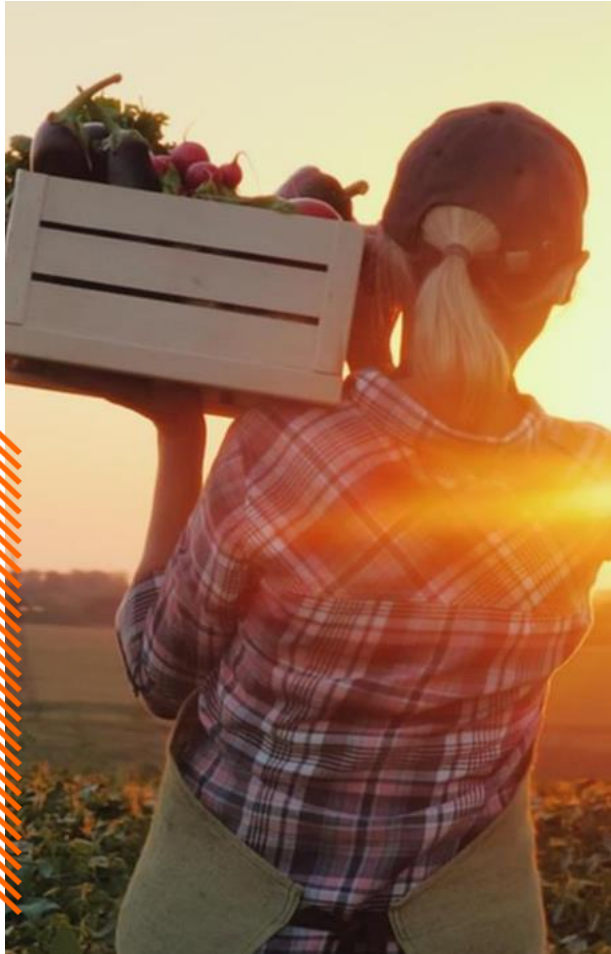




Summary of small-group discussions

01 Key strengths and challenges of the Victorian food system

KEY STRENGTHS

- There is a supportive policy framework in Victoria that provides opportunities to prioritise health and wellbeing and climate change. The Public Health and Wellbeing Act (2008) continues to make health and wellbeing a primary driver of food systems change.
 - The Consensus Statement on Food System reform is important and lays the foundations for future collaborations across the system.
 - The food relief sector has 'come of age' and is well organised; there is a good platform for networking and sharing information.
 - The pandemic has drawn public attention to issues of food insecurity gaps and other critical vulnerability in the food system. This represents an opportunity for keeping the momentum going.
 - Victoria has a diverse and flourishing grassroots food sector, including new small-scale distribution and other community-led initiatives.
 - Victorian food system actors are demonstrating out-of-the-box thinking, with many people moving towards new technologies and innovative modes of production, including urban farming.
 - Victoria has good soils, and its agricultural sector is diverse and able to produce a broad range of high-quality and healthy food year-round.
- 
- Expanding academic interest and a growing evidence base demonstrates the importance of sustainable food systems and creates opportunities for collaboration with food movements and farmers.
 - There is increasing investment and commitment from local government. New community food strategies and policies (such as Cardinia Shire Council and City of Greater Bendigo) offer inspiration for others.
 - Sustain's Local Government Food Systems Networking Forum is a great resource for sharing information amongst local government staff interested in learning from each other.



01 Key strengths and challenges of the Victorian food system

CRITICAL CHALLENGES

- Pricing is a key challenge: how can we make good food affordable and accessible to all and especially those who need it most? How can we ensure farmers receive a fair price and farm workers are paid fairly at the same time?
- The dominant industrialised food system is deeply entrenched, and most people go to supermarkets to get their food, which is also where the ultra-processed food industry is concentrated and benefiting most. There is a real need for cultural shift.
- Capitalist corporate structures control knowledge and the narrative. Communities struggle to confront this power and take control of the narrative. How can the food movement protect itself from co-option by corporate actors for their own agenda?
- The food swamp phenomenon in growth area suburbs is a major health issue and points to a real gap in planning policy.
- Urban sprawl and loss of farmland has been a difficult issue to tackle, particularly with pressure placed on local and state government by the development industry.
- More work also needs to be done in terms of land conservation and farmers' welfare.
- There is no clear responsibility and accountability for food policy across the state. Food policy responses are distributed across local government and vary widely in their scope and resourcing.
- There are limited mechanisms for sharing knowledge and advocacy.
- Communities and local government are already doing a lot; however this work is often over-reliant on one champion, which threatens the viability of good initiatives and policies.
- It's challenging to engage state government in food systems events or policy.
- There are too many financial and structural barriers for young people to enter farming.
- There are many impediments for self-determination of local communities and of First Nations peoples in the food system.
- The reality of farming and surviving on stolen land raise complex questions with no easy answers.
- Lack of overall responsibility to create solutions to food insecurity and lack of coordination between government departments, results in siloed approaches to food policy responses.
- Excessive food packaging and agro-chemical inputs are a threat to the sustainability of the Victorian food system.
- Overseas investment in Australian farmland is a risk to food security.
- Too many solutions to complex food system problems place on the individual rather than structural issues or policy responses.
- Combating misinformation and making food systems more interesting to talk about for more people is hard work.



Shared learning and developing a strong evidence base is really important.



02 Changes needed to address key food system challenges

- Community-led initiatives are critical to addressing food system issues, and this was never more apparent than in the context of the pandemic. Small organisations produced responses to food system issues in ways that are more flexible than larger scale government and charity structures, which often do not reach isolated or the most disadvantaged communities. Large food banks are over-represented in consultation processes about government responses to food insecurity.
- We need to find ways to share resources and connecting people facing similar issues.
- Dominant narratives need to be challenged in order to create change, and we find a shared language for food systems transformation.
- Creating change and building strong, respectful partnerships that create healthier societies is everyone's responsibility.
- We need to value and celebrate the good work that communities are already doing.
- We should draw on international examples of involving children in decision-making.
- A common language is needed to help build relationships and understanding across sectors.
- We need strong interest and engagement from state government in community food initiatives and a food systems policy agenda.
- Trust and generosity are the foundation to furthering a collaborative agenda.

“ Connection between people and the environment is vital and provides opportunities for change.

“

Bendigo did a very comprehensive consultation process in developing the food system strategy, based on genuine engagement. Over 100 people come to regular food system strategy meetings, and a lot of them are farmers. The reciprocity that comes with building strong local connections and valuing voices is so important.





03 Implications for policy, research and practice

- Local governments need to be empowered and better resourced to take a direct role in food system governance. Many LGs are already taking action but face many barriers that limit their capacity and the scope of policy responses.
- Local and state government needs to consult more closely with community food relief organisations in developing wider-scale responses to critical food insecurity issues.
- Community groups play a central role in food literacy education and are an important way of empowering young people and marginalised groups to join food systems conversations.
- More emphasis on children's food education is needed to increase healthy eating and food system literacy amongst young people.
- More support for school meals is needed as these are very important to improving food equity among young people.
- All food system policy and program development and implementation needs to involve collaboration with diverse stakeholders and, particularly, to include and amplify the voices of those least represented.
- The Productivity Commission could be a potential ally for support with research and furthering a policy agenda.
- We need to engage with a broader range of stakeholders from land management organisations to Indigenous groups and seek collaborations outside of our usual circles.
- Creating change and building strong, respectful partnerships that create healthier societies is everyone's responsibility.
- We need to create opportunities to gain a better understanding of the lived experience of food insecurity.
- Stronger engagement is needed with federal government regarding national food and nutrition policies.
- Councillors play an important role in pushing for a food systems agenda in councils. Connecting early is essential.

“ This catchup today has been a real energiser, and positive experience for the sector.

“ The ARC research project demonstrates the value of research translation and plain language resources for community and government practitioners.






Reflections from dialogue facilitators

Reflections from Nick Rose

Sustain: The Australian Food Network
Executive Director



Positive food systems action is multifaceted and requires a coherent approach from diverse actors. Across the course of the event, it became apparent that sharing knowledge among food system actors and establishing a common language in which all food system discussions can be conducted were important for extending and refining existing work. Creating spaces where actors and activists can regularly connect, share and collaborate will be important for providing a platform for knowledge exchange and aligning messages.

Indigenous knowledges, expertise from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and inclusion of marginalised communities whose perspectives and experiences are often not included are essential ingredients that must be at the forefront of all attempts at tackling issues resulting from contemporary food systems.

Immediate recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and sovereignty is vital to address the serious disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a result of colonisation, dispossession and ongoing racism. Decolonising the food system is important for not only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but also for creating food sovereignty for all Australians.

WHAT STEPS CAN BE TAKEN TO ADDRESS IMBALANCES OF POWER AND INEQUITIES IN THE FOOD SYSTEM?

Knowledge is power and **education is key**. Supporting young people to become informed about and engaged with these issues is very important. The Cardinia Youth Food Security Network (now Flourish) is an example of leadership on these issues from young people, with a group of youth leaders getting a real insight into what urban and rural students think about food insecurity. Finding ways of engaging youth in decision-making processes is vital. With VicHealth funding, Monash University is working with primary school students to conduct a food systems audit and map the built food environment and present those results to local government. A related initiative, which is exciting and empowering, has seen kids designing their own food system using Minecraft.

Supermarkets need regulation and government intervention. The Productivity Commission has barely published anything for the last four years and then it was about less red tape for farmers. A national agenda must be developed involving the Productivity Commission, with a focus on the change and damage to the food system. It is much more important than merely sheer economics. We could encourage the Productivity Commission to engage in research on this topic, and that could be very helpful in providing momentum for related policy.

There is an opportunity and a need for a national food and nutrition policy, especially in the context of COVID-19. Being able to demonstrate projects with employment outcomes builds confidence both locally and federally. Confrontation is not going to be helpful – we (food system advocates) need to engage strategically.



Reflections from Professor Karen Charlton

University Of Wollongong,
Nutrition And Dietetics

Having a food system that allows all Australians to have access to healthy and sustainable food is not yet a reality, despite living in a country that is wealthy and produces much more food than its population needs.

A focus of governments to allow the food system to be moulded by retail giants over the past 20-30 years has resulted from lack of policies related to planning for land use and the built environment. The tide is changing, however, with consumers demanding a food system that is supportive of both planetary and human health. This means reimagining the way in which food is grown, transported, and ultimately consumed. The energy and commitment of civil society to a grassroots approach will need to be met with commitments from state and local governments to transform the food system for health of Australia and its people.



Key issues

01 Get to the root of the problem
Strategies are too focussed on emergency relief (FoodBank, Second Bite etc.), rather than addressing underlying causes of food insecurity. The lack of regulation around planning for food outlets and shops is leading to food swamps (where an abundance of fast food outlets, convenience stores, and liquor stores outnumbers healthy food options) in parts of Tasmania (and elsewhere) where rapid housing developments are being built. There is a need for a preventive approach, with locally-based solutions.

02 Food relief agencies are only a stop-gap
Reliance on food relief is not getting to the root of the problem. However food relief agencies play a critical role in preventing hunger. The pandemic revealed critical vulnerabilities within the food relief sector. People who were already experiencing food insecurity, and accessing community pantries, were put under further stress as pantries emptied quickly when supplies and donations had dried up. Food relief may alleviate food insecurity, but it does not always succeed in improving nutrition security, as many options are not healthy, and fruits and vegetables were in short supply for these agencies during COVID-19.



03

Community-led food co-ops and food gardens need champions to thrive and survive

Food coops bring life to the community and promote local supply chains but require a local champion and a group of individuals to run and sustain them in the long term. Many food hubs, including those that provide crucial access to fresh produce in regional areas, are volunteer-run. Initiatives such as these face long-term challenges when key volunteers move on, or experience burn out, signalling the need for increased assistance, particularly grants and other forms of funding.

04

Supply chain issues for local farmers and an ageing farmer workforce

A local food supply poses reciprocal benefits for community and growers. However, supply chain issues are a potential barrier, especially for farmers markets that can be inefficient for farmers to attend and are often held at venues with no public transport.

The pandemic highlighted the importance of local food networks. It also showcased the flaws associated with a reliance on migrant workers, with the lack of farm labour resulting in many acres of apples, for example, being ploughed into the ground instead of being picked.

The lack of succession planning for ageing farmers was highlighted as a significant issue. Land prices make small-scale farming prohibitive to younger people to take up the call. The state government has a role to play to ensure equitable access to land for agriculture and farming.



05 Need for greater cohesion between different levels of government around food systems

Responsibility for governance of the food system in Australia is disjointed, and this lack of alignment between federal, state and local governments is prohibitive to strengthening local food systems from the grassroots level upwards. Multiple narratives may be useful for gaining the attention of government – climate change, preventive health, basic human rights

for adequate access to food – but questions arose regarding which lens would prove most effective, how to integrate these narratives, and what would be the most effective advocacy strategy. Victoria demonstrates better collaboration between state and local governments than other states, and through VicHealth’s taxation of alcohol and tobacco, has provided funding for food systems work, including a flagship project with people under the age of 25 years.

In light of this disjointed and unclear government involvement in food system issues, responsibility often falls to community organisations and civil society to apply pressure for change.

Governments need to play a key role in food regulation and protecting people against unhealthy marketing practices and should draw on lessons from the anti-tobacco movement.

06 Education and advocacy: Developing “disruptors”

The group discussed the potential that students hold to influence upstream levers, but that this requires programs to upskill and increase knowledge. Current awareness of food system issues, through the lens of planetary sustainability, provides an opportunity to look at the food system differently. There is a need to harness education in this information age to produce “wellness warriors” and advocates that can represent consumers and develop a groundswell movement.

Educational institutions at all levels can contribute to developing “disruptors” of the food system status quo. Schools are places of learning, and many include community/kitchen food gardens to teach students skills in growing and cooking their own food, which translates to positive benefits in the home. Successful apprenticeship models exist that enable young people (grades 10-12) to achieve (food-related) industry certifications.

Other “disruptor” initiatives include the Youth Food Security Movement. The group also discussed how a more “disruptive” and aggressive approach is required to aid messaging using social media platforms (e.g., “We will run out of soil before we run out of oil”). However, these initiatives require funding to extend their reach and be most effective, with potential funding opportunities including private philanthropies, charities, and financial institutions.





Reflections from Peter Kenyon

Healthy Food Policy Advocate
& Community Leader

////////////////////

We often recognise the diversity of issues inherent in food systems thinking and research, but we often reduce our legislative or regulatory target to local government as the most immediate and accessible government actor in the food space. With a more nuanced and comprehensive awareness of government we might well find more and more diverse allies and advocates across all tiers: local, state and federal. A developing understanding of the different tiers of government and their particular food system responsibilities would see a more targeted approach to calls for food system change.

Mapping parliamentary actions and interests is a process that could potentially yield some low hanging fruit. Maiden speeches are often the only genuine window into an elected representative's deepest concerns and drivers before party politics takes over. Lobbying organisations map these mentions and track actions to find "soft spots". If food system advocates undertook similar mapping of MPs' maiden speeches, several food system allies could likely be uncovered. We advocates should then ask 'How can we help MPs with solutions?'

Local government is the most accessible target for calls for food systems policy and action but is the tier of government least financed to make change.

Building networks and alliances across parties, chambers and tiers of government is necessary to effect long-term awareness and change. A Parliamentary Friends of Food group could be started with the right sponsors in parliament, which could become a powerful vehicle to deliver ideas and facts (and pleasure) to the Australia parliament outside the usual, fraught political process. Food system allies could unite to make this a reality. Food system advocates could also engage with the political process more directly through membership, party policy development and standing for election.





CLOSING REFLECTIONS:

Call out corporate power in the food system (as though our lives depend on it)

Dr Kelly Donati

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The Victorian Independent Food Systems Summit represented an impressive and exciting collective of researchers and practitioners with deep commitments to food system transformation. Many participants work in local government and community organisations, doing the difficult work of trying to create change.

As Uncle Ghillar and Senator Lidia Thorpe observed in opening the event, the effects of colonisation and dispossession are not facts of the past, but matters for the present and future. They manifest through the very politics and policies that purport to keep Australia “secure”. Despite the exciting developments in food system governance at a local level, Australia’s agricultural and economic development policies at the federal level continue to re-enact the fiction of *terra nullius* on a daily basis. The federal government sets out its vision for the future of our food system in the *Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper* and the *Developing Northern Australia White Paper* which proposes to help the north achieve its “full potential”.

The north of Australia is home to thousands of First Nations communities. Its rivers nourish the land and its people. Rivers are not merely the resource needed to sustain life or agricultural economies. Rivers are sacred. Without water flowing through the veins of Country, sacred bonds are broken. Without sacred bonds, the spiritual connections between people and place – which sustain wellbeing – become brittle. Good health is not about the individual. It is about the health of the relations that sustain the liveliness of our bodies, minds, communities and spirit. Good health is collective. Water – lifeblood for some, “liquid gold” for others – is at the heart of the living systems that sustain health and wellbeing. Recent events have demonstrated once again the deadly consequences of what happens when we ignore this simple fact.



In January 2019, the nation witnessed the killing of a river. Cotton irrigators upstream, enabled by a poorly conceived and undemocratic framework for water governance, starved the Darling River of water. As the nation watched heartbreaking scenes of fish gasping for oxygen and floating to the surface as they died, a life-world appeared to unravel before us. Water from the river became toxic. Entire communities – many Indigenous – were forced to rely on bottled water for drinking and bathing. Drought was blamed. The agricultural system that extracted the lifeblood of a sacred river system remained unchallenged. Yet nothing changed. The media cycle moved on.

In the Black Summer of 2019/2020, a rapacious inferno ravaged the Australian landscape. Country – cared for and nourished with fire by those who love it – was ripped asunder, charred beyond recognition. [First Nations scholars](#) wrote of the searing pain and “perpetual grief” that accompany bearing witness to the incineration of sacred places and totemic beings. Some pundits blamed drought (and arsonists). Others rightly pointed to a global crisis bearing down upon us.

As the fires raged, people marched on the streets demanding climate action. N95 masks protected their lungs from the choking smoke that blanketed cities and towns on the east coast of Australia. Our then-Prime Minister Scott Morrison paternalistically chided student protesters for being “too activist”. They were fighting for their future.

The effects of climate change and the absence of effective government is manifesting in a climate anxiety that affects mental health and wellbeing in ways that are only just beginning to be understood. My own experience teaching in the Bachelor of Food Studies at William Angliss Institute tells me that many young people feel a profound responsibility to be the future leaders who will make change happen. It is an impossible, unjust burden to place on a generation who did not create the problem but will live with its consequences. What is at stake, [as one delegate at the recent COP26 climate summit reminded us](#), is whether today’s children will have to fight for food and water in the future.



In Sustain’s National Pandemic Garden survey undertaken in July 2020, many gardeners spoke about an existential anxiety – not only about the pandemic we live through in this very moment but their fear for the future as they witness worlds coming undone around them. Many shared how their garden was a place where relationships could flourish, somewhere to nurture life and, as one gardener put it, satisfy a basic need to nurture others — the plants, soil, animals and people who gather around its abundance.

Why does this matter in the context of the Food Systems Summit? It matters because the findings speak to the values to which so many participants expressed commitment: the need for fairness and equity in the food system, the need for more sustainable ways of growing food and enjoying the bounty of the earth and the need for policies that support the health and wellbeing of communities. It matters because the concentration of power in the food system is always the elephant in the room.



“ The concentration of power in the food system is always the elephant in the room.



Corporate power perpetuates the fiction of terra nullius through agricultural policy agendas that continually seek out new “frontiers” for extraction and frame native title as “red tape” and an obstacle to “true” development. It is underpinned by a colonial logic enabled by techno-utopian fantasies of dammed rivers and vast irrigated monocultures for export commodity production. As we head into an increasingly uncertain future, its ramifications cannot be ignored.

We already know that the food system’s most intractable problems cannot be tackled using the same linear thinking and techno-scientific approaches that are sucking the life from soil, rivers and people. We also know that the dominant food system that currently makes people and ecosystems sick and vulnerable did not just happen. It was made—and *therefore it can be made otherwise.*

Our discussions at the Food Systems Summit emphasised important developments in food system governance within local government who interface directly with its communities. Local government bears responsibility for the health and wellbeing of its communities but it also remains an arm of government that is also poorly funded, constrained by policy frameworks outside its immediate control and often hamstrung by the need to not appear “political”. It is therefore critical that we never lose sight of powerful vested interests that line the corridors of power with the profits of their extraction. The corporate lobbyists are experts in shaping the policy landscape in favour of their clients. And so, as academics, practitioners, policy-makers and food citizens, we must work together in calling out and making visible this corporate capture of our political system and in speaking truth to its insidious, corrupting toxicity for the world we collectively inhabit.

This is why dialogue is central to food system transformation. Dialogue is how we mobilise our diverse capacities, draw inspiration from each other and devise more participatory systems of governance that distribute power and work to create a flourishing and life-sustaining food system for all.





Participant feedback

What did participants enjoy about the event?

“ Sustain has a great ability to draw a diverse range of people ‘into the room’ and that is an asset for these discussions of food systems. It’s a system so of course we need diverse stakeholder groups talking to one another.

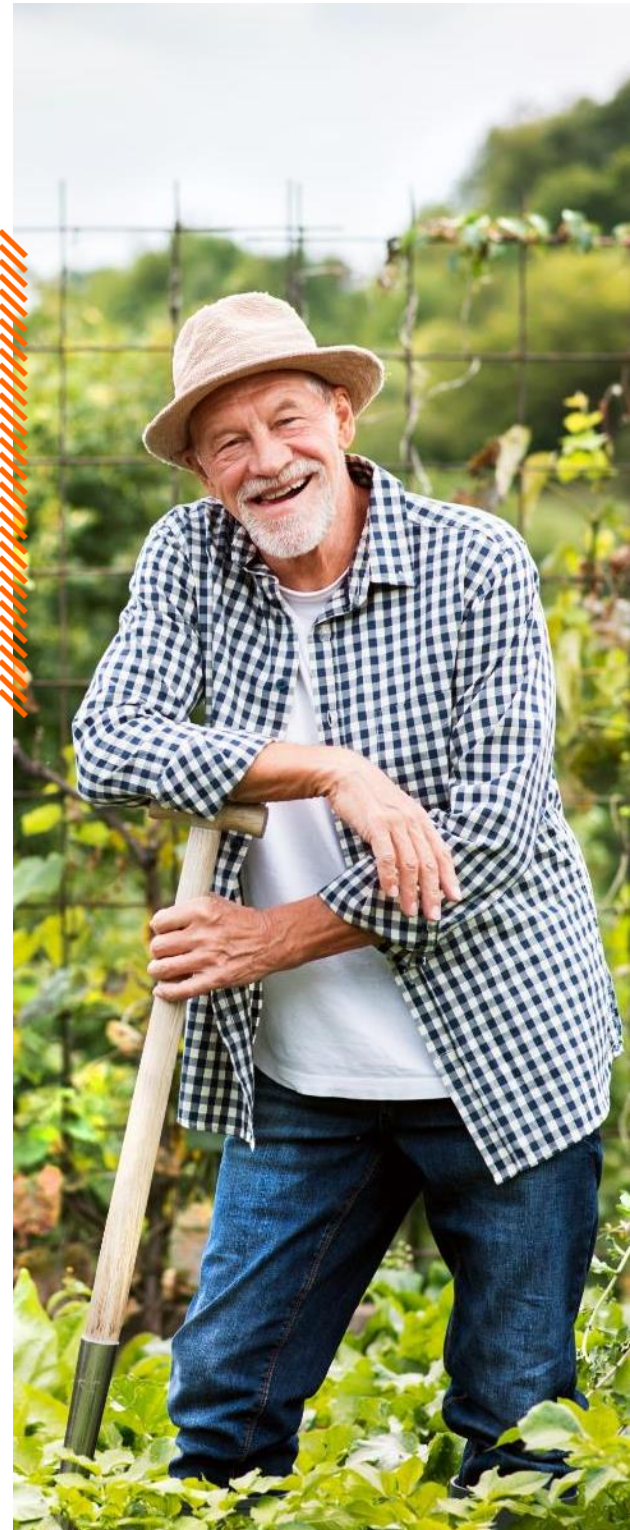
“ Fantastic day with great content. I enjoyed the mix of group sessions (breakout rooms) and presentations, and the Miro board complemented the day well.

“ Well managed by Sustain and the support of the students from the Just Food Collective. It’s great to see the students involved.

“ I appreciate the small group discussion rooms as they give everyone the opportunity to have a voice.

“ There was a great selection of presenters.

“ Attending today has given me a better idea of who is working in this area, and how system change can be brought about.





What actions did participants say they would take as a result of the event?

- “ Draw on the findings of the ARC research for advocacy.
- “ Help Sustain advocate for the \$500 million edible gardening fund.
- “ Read more about VicHealth’s Local Government Partnership project, and look into what my Council has been doing in relation to this initiative.
- “ Build my networks by following up with the great presenters, new connections and initiatives I heard about.
- “ Learn about existing programs and community services that were represented by other attendees.
- “ The work being done by VicHealth has a lot of benefit for our organisation, and I look forward to understanding this further and what can be replicated on a local level within Tasmania.





“ I really appreciated the focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and will ensure I emulate this for future events that I plan.

“ Follow the progress of the ARC project’s papers being released, and the delivery of the VicHealth modules.

“ Engage with Councillors and other elected members to increase their awareness of and support for addressing food system issues.

“ Create and maintain beneficial relationships with community groups to maximise benefits and reduce duplication.

“ Bring state governments into communication with local governments through events like these.

“ Consider the groups whose voices are lost or left out of these conversations, and work with them to amplify their voices.

“ Work with students to enhance youth leadership.



Links and readings to explore

- [Sustain's Australian Food Systems Directory](#)
- [ARC research project website – Strengthening local food systems governance](#)
- [Sustain's Local Government Food Systems Networking Forum](#) - quarterly meet-ups and community of practice for staff in councils that are members of Sustain to share lessons and practice with each other
- [The Right to Food Coalition](#)
- [Food studies at William Angliss](#)
- [Just Food Collective](#)
- [Cultivate Farms](#)
- ["Regeneration: Growing New Farmers"](#) from Young Farmers Connect and Farmer Incubator
- [Hopework](#)
- [Food Security Network](#)
- [OzHarvest's NEST program](#) for food literacy
- [Eat Well Tasmania and Healthy Food Access Tasmania](#)
- [Milan Urban Food Policy Pact](#)
- [Vermont Agriculture and Food System Strategic Plan 2021-2030](#)
- [Foodprint Melbourne research](#)
- [Kids co-designing sustainable and healthy environments](#)
- ["Ecocide, genocide, capitalism and colonialism: Consequences for indigenous peoples and global ecosystems environments"](#)
- [Problems, policy and politics – perspectives of public health leaders on food insecurity and human rights in Australia](#)
- [From Koo Wee Rup to Nar Nar Goon: Can Participatory Food Policy Making Processes Contribute to Healthier and Fairer Food Systems in the Australian Municipal Context? A Case Study from Cardinia Shire, Melbourne](#)





Appendix 1 – Attendee profile

Characteristics of event attendees

Characteristics of event attendees		N	%
Total respondents (76)		76	
Age	19-30	22	29
	31-50	35	46
	51-65	18	24
	66-80	1	1
Gender	Female	63	84
	Male	10	13
	Other/prefer not to say	2	3
Primary food system sector	Agriculture	6	9
	Communications	1	2
	Education	15	23
	Environment	2	3
	Food retailing	5	8
	Food industry	2	3
	Health care	12	19
	Government	11	17
	Nutrition	9	14
	Utilities	1	2
Stakeholder group	Government	11	14
	NGO/not-for-profit	17	22
	Philanthropy	1	1
	Food enterprise	10	13
	Farmer	2	3
	Academic	13	17
	Other	19	25

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