



EON Foundation

**Submission from EON Foundation to:
Parliament of Western Australia
Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People**

**Inquiry into the most effective ways for Western Australia
to address food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty.**

Introduction

EON Foundation (EON) was founded in 2005 to address the unacceptably high rates of infection and chronic disease in remote Aboriginal communities which have severe flow on effects on health, education outcomes, the ability to fully participate in the workforce and general life opportunities. Many of these diseases are caused or compounded by food insecurity and poor nutrition and EON's program addresses this issue in a direct, practical, community-driven way through (a) establishing edible gardens in partnership with the school and community for a secure local source of fresh food and (b) delivering fortnightly, hands-on health, nutrition and gardening education and training to the schools' children and their families.

To date, EON has delivered its successful, invitation-only, 5-year grassroots program to 39 remote communities across Western Australia and the Northern Territory and the program has a special focus on children and young people.

We currently deliver the program to 20 remote schools and communities across Western Australia and the Northern Territory, and we have a waiting list of additional communities seeking to partner with us.

WA schools/communities with whom we are currently working include: Yiyili and Yakanarra in the Kimberley region, Marble Bar and Jigalong in the Pilbara region and Meekatharra, Mount Magnet and Yalgoo in the Mid-West of WA.

Aboriginal children and young people living in these communities are some of the most impoverished in our state.

Reference 1. The impact of poor nutrition on children and young people and the extent of the problem in Western Australia.

We have been working in the above Western Australian regions for many years and our team of Project Managers visit their allocated communities on a fortnightly basis throughout the year. We are acutely aware of the effects of poor diet on Aboriginal children and young people living in the communities with whom we partner. Disproportionate rates of Type 2 diabetes, kidney disease, heart disease, anaemia, and ear disease (among others) affect the children and young people in these communities and our staff witness the impact of poor diet and food insecurity on a daily basis.

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Our stakeholders, including Principals and teachers, also consistently report to us on the negative impact of poor nutrition on school students. For example, poor nutrition exacerbates limited concentration spans and chronic ear infections can make it impossible for children to hear properly in the classroom.

It is well known that the prevalence of the above diseases and other nutrition-related health problems in remote Aboriginal communities results in a very high health care cost burden – both in terms of primary health care costs and secondary costs and impacts.

The broader flow-on effects for children are both devastating and costly - including compromised early childhood development, impaired capacity for learning and poor engagement in the education system including poor school retention rates. So good nutrition and access to fresh fruit and vegetables early in life is not only vital to children's health but, critically, their prospects at school.

As adults, these children struggle to get jobs, are disengaged and more likely to end up in the justice system, plus face the prospects of chronic ill health and early death.

Sadly, we have seen first-hand the negative impact of poor nutrition and hunger on children's development and behaviour and acknowledge this must be playing a role in the current violence and anti-social behaviour being seen in young Aboriginal people across parts of the Kimberley region.

As we are not medical experts, we will leave it to others to address Term of Reference 1 in more detail in terms of the health impacts of poor nutrition.

We will now direct our submission to Terms of Reference 2, 4, 6 and 7.

Reference 2. Challenges for children and young people in accessing enough nutritious food.

The children and young people with whom we interact have challenges with accessibility to fresh, nutritious food. The availability and the quality of fresh fruit and vegetables in remote communities across WA is low compared with urban areas and cities. This is due to factors such as: poor road and sea conditions throughout the year limiting frequency of deliveries; road closures due to seasonal conditions and bad weather causing significant delays in delivery; plus travel distances of several hundred kilometres from main distribution centres results in reduced food quality and shelf life for the consumer.

There is also the issue of lack of affordability that is a barrier to access.

Small population size of communities creates limited buying power so that choices are restricted and prices high. It has been reported that some remote communities are paying up to 39% more at the store checkout than those who shop in cities and urban areas.¹

¹ SBS News, Aaron Fernandes, Kearyn Cox, 17 May 2022, 5.51am
<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/remote-communities-pay-39-per-cent-more-at-the-supermarket-checkout-than-city-shoppers-heres-why-thats-a-problem/se08d2zjm>



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Community residents regularly face inconsistent supply and limited availability of good quality, nutritious food from stores. EON's observations include:

- Fruit and vegetables supplied to these remote communities is of poor quality & goes “off” quickly; it is only worth buying when the delivery vehicle first comes in and sometimes there can be a fortnight between deliveries.
- Housing issues impact food security – many houses have no refrigerator and overcrowding means no room for storage of food; kitchens have no bench space for food preparation
- The cost of healthy food at the local store can simply be prohibitive for many families who are living in poverty.
- Shelves in the community store can be empty and essential supplies unavailable to purchase.
- ‘Takeaway’ food options in regional and remote areas tend to be low nutrition, highly processed offerings.

Reference 4. The extent to which food literacy programs aimed at children and young people and/or their parents/carers:

- a. Are currently accessed; and***
- b. Are effective.***

EON's Thriving Communities Program falls within the definition of a “food literacy program” as it aims to give Aboriginal children/young people and their carers/families a better understanding of nutrition, cooking, how to grow their own food as well as other aspects of food management such as budgeting and shopping. It also has some elements of a food relief program as healthy meals and snacks are provided to the children when they participate in our healthy eating and edible garden lessons. Children and young people can also help themselves to fresh produce in the EON gardens on a daily basis.

The program has three integrated components to provide a holistic disease prevention program.

1. **EON Edible Garden** - A large vegetable, bush food and fruit garden established at the community school, including all infrastructure to make it viable in the long term such as reticulation, fencing and a shadehouse. The children have access to the fresh produce and learn how to grow it through fortnightly lessons from EON Project Managers. The focus is on the school because it is stable and consistent. Assistance is also given to community members who want to establish edible gardens in community and at their homes.
2. **EON Healthy Eating** - A comprehensive nutrition, cooking and hygiene program for children and adults to increase knowledge about the importance of a healthy diet. The program becomes part of the weekly school timetable and EON Project Managers deliver fortnightly classes in nutrition, cooking and “healthy homes”. The adults participate in regular workshops.
3. **EON Training, Education & Employment** - formal and informal horticultural and/or nutrition training is provided to senior students and adult community members to ensure sustainability and job creation.



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Whenever possible, EON employs and trains local community members and works with the local job networks (CDP) to ensure the EON program creates jobs.

The program revolves around practical activities that improve access to and enjoyment of healthy food for children and young people. For eg:

- Gardening activities like planting seeds, maintaining the garden and harvesting fruit and vegetables- these are eaten raw, used in the cooking classes or taken home in special packs for families to enjoy together.
- Cooking activities like preparing healthy meals in the school kitchen, such as stir fries and curries, incorporating garden produce that everyone can then share as they discuss the nutrition aspects.

We note our program complements other food relief and food literacy programs such as the school breakfast club and Foodbank WA's "Food Sensations" program.

Our comments below relate to access and effectiveness of the Thriving Communities Program.

Access

EON's program operates as invitation-only, so we only partner with communities who invite us in and agree to a 5-year partnership. The program is currently accessed- either as the full 5-year program, or as a tailored extension of the completed program - by 20 schools/communities, 7 of whom are based in remote or regional WA.

EON has had expressions of interest from further remote or regional communities in WA however we need to secure further funding to address this need.

Once we do have the requisite funding we enter into a Partnership Plan with the community school and the community themselves. As part of the negotiated Partnership Plan and informed by community consultation, the school provides EON with approved access to students and ensures our fortnightly lessons are part of the schools' teaching timetable. Children who access the program include preschool, primary school and high school students. We also provide lessons to parents/carers through workshops with "Mums and Bubs" and playgroups at the school.

The community consultation period prior to program commencement allows us to start developing relationships with the school and community members that promote access and engagement in the program. For example, consulting with community about the design of the garden and what aspects of the program they are keen to explore encourages involvement. Once program delivery commences, promoting a simple 'community cook up' incorporating EON's key nutrition messages can be a way that EON reaches and engages more families. We build up trust and strong relationships through our regular presence over a sustained period- this is key to children and young people getting involved.



Effectiveness

EON is outcomes driven so we monitor evidence of success through independent evaluation, ongoing monitoring and evaluation, and community feedback.

EON's long-term objective is to effect generational change by reducing preventable and chronic disease through better access to fresh food and improving nutrition and eating behaviours. The more immediate impacts we can measure are changes in knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of children and young people around food and nutrition. At the start of the program, baseline information is obtained for all communities through surveys, interviews and student questionnaires which is then used as a comparison for interval data collected mid-way through the program and then again with data collected at completion of the 5-year program.

Additional information is received from fortnightly reports by EON Project Managers in the field to ensure constant and meaningful progress against **KPIs** which include:

- ✚ Improved access to healthy food
- ✚ Increased knowledge of the link between nutrition and health
- ✚ Improved dietary and hygiene attitudes and practices
- ✚ School-aged children have a strong skill base in gardening, cooking and nutrition; and
- ✚ Improved education and training, leading to employment

The most recent round of Monitoring and Evaluation in 2021, surveying students and stakeholders across three communities in the Mid-West who have partnered with EON since 2019 found that *"the EON Thriving Communities Program has made a lasting and impactful contribution to the school, students and wider communities in which it has operated"*. (August 2021)

The evaluation found that the EON gardens have provided school and community access to fresh food which is otherwise scarce and expensive. Two years into the program a greater proportion of students in the Mid-West had taken produce from the garden home, had grown produce at home and now know how to cook something healthy with fruit and vegetables than at the start of the program.

Stakeholder feedback from teachers, principals and partners within the Mid-West reported EON activities and gardens have directly contributed to improved student knowledge, attitudes and behaviours with respect to healthy eating, and growing and cooking healthy food. Teachers and principals report EON programs have contributed to increased school attendance and engagement. The EON program is described as being meaningfully integrated with the schools teaching and learning program.

Further, a recent independent evaluation of EON's program conducted by the Australian Government Department of Health concluded that *"EON's Thriving Communities Program makes a meaningful contribution toward the Commonwealth Department of Health's goals to improve the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples"*. (CIRCA Report, Feb 2022)



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It is our experience that the children genuinely love participating in the healthy activities the program provides. They find joy in the physical activity of gardening and feel pride in learning how to prepare healthy meals using fruit and vegetables they have helped to grow. School staff consistently report back to us that the EON program encourages both engagement and attendance, with children more likely to come to school on a day they know EON is there. They also regularly feedback to us that children who struggle with traditional learning in the classroom tend to do much better in the garden setting.

Reference 6. Existing initiatives: how EON is addressing the issue of food insecurity for children and young people in remote communities

EON's 5-year Thriving Communities Program addresses the high rate of chronic disease caused or compounded by poor nutrition and food insecurity with a direct, practical and community-driven approach.

Demand for the program comes from remote communities and schools who are motivated to improve their health and therefore life chances by improving their nutrition. Particularly since COVID-19 led to food shortages and additional risk to their health, Aboriginal communities are seeking EON's help more than ever.

We note the recent Federal Government inquiry into food security in remote Aboriginal communities resulted in a number of recommendations focused on supporting local food production. In particular, the inquiry report recommended the Australian government support local food production "*driven by First Nations people themselves*". This concept is the bedrock of EON's invitation-only model.

Our Thriving Communities Program reduces preventable chronic disease- and its social consequences- caused or compounded by food insecurity and poor nutrition by:

- ✚ **Establishing large local edible gardens** to provide food security and access to healthy food for school children and community members.
- ✚ **Delivering effective nutrition education, training and skills** ie the motivation and means to improve nutrition on a sustainable basis and create enduring healthy lifestyle change.
- ✚ **Early intervention to effect generational change** – ensuring infants (plus parents) and primary school children in particular, have the opportunity, motivation and means for improved nutrition.
- ✚ **Engaging children at school thereby improving well-being and educational outcomes, by:**
 - Using edible gardens as an alternative to the classroom, outdoors on the land – growing produce to eat and providing practical skills through hands-on learning.
 - Engaging children who struggle with conventional learning.
 - Providing formal and informal gardening/horticultural and nutrition/cooking education and training to senior students



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- Helping children be and stay healthy and better able to learn.
- Providing an incentive to attend school.
- ✚ **Improving social, physical and emotional wellbeing** through engagement in community gardens, building capacity for people to stay well and providing training and employment opportunities for senior students and adults in the community.

Nutritious meals are provided as part of the program, take-home vegetable packs are given to families to share and children can also help themselves to fresh produce straight from the garden if they are hungry.

Alongside the physical benefits that come from nutritious eating and a healthy lifestyle are the mental health benefits associated with the program. The EON garden affords students and visitors a place of calm and respite. Social and emotional well-being benefits arise from local high school students and adults engaging in purpose-driven employment, working on delivering the program alongside our Project Managers.

We note that EON's Thriving Communities Program can play an important role in helping achieve Target 1 of the 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Target 1 seeks to close the gap in life expectancy within a generation, with the desired outcome that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy long and healthy lives. Dietary factors are cited as a driver behind the existing gap in life expectancy. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report that life expectancy for Indigenous Australians is estimated to be 71.6 years for males and 75.6 years for females. In comparison, life expectancy at birth for non-Indigenous Australians is 80.2 years for males and 83.4 years for females. Heart disease and diabetes- conditions linked to poor diet- are the two leading specific causes of death in Indigenous Australians.

Reference 7. Western Australia's² obligations and responsibilities to monitor and address food insecurity as an aspect of child wellbeing.

The concept of a human right to food is well established internationally. It is specifically required by several international agreements to which Australia is a signatory. In 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) included the right of every person "to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, *including adequate food, clothing and housing*". [Article 25]. Australia is an original signatory to the UDHR, and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade states "we have been a leading proponent of its consistent and comprehensive implementation".

While the UDHR is not legally binding, it was followed up in 1975 by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESR). Ratified by Australia in 1975, Article 11 requires countries to

² It is generally the case that the Australian Government is the recognised party to an international agreement. But as a federation it is understood that the responsibility of implementing Australia's obligations flow through to the states and territories.



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take pro-active steps to ensure food security, through 'respecting, protecting and fulfilling' the right to food. Australia is required to report on its progress and in its most recent report in 2016 focused on food security in Indigenous communities.

The Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) speaks specifically to the rights of children to food security. Article 14 requires that countries take appropriate measures to combat disease and malnutrition among children through the provision of adequate nutritious foods; and to provide education to parents and children on 'child health and nutrition'. Australia ratified the CRC in 1990 which means - according to the Australian Human Rights Commission- that Australia "has a duty to ensure that all children in Australia enjoy the rights set out in the treaty".

In addition to the normal obligations implied under our federal system, the duties imposed by the CRC apply to Western Australia through the appointment of the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA. Specifically stated in the 9 key rights for WA children and young people is the 'right to a healthy life'. In making sure the rights are upheld, the Commissioner "must give special consideration to "those children who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason".

In 2015 Australia endorsed the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This includes a goal of 'Zero Hunger' by 2030. Zero Hunger is defined as 'end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture'. Australia reports on its progress through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. In 2018 the Report focused on improving food security in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

In addition to the above enshrined obligations, it is our view that our state has a moral obligation to children and young people to urgently address the issue of food security. Children in a wealthy state in a wealthy country like Australia should not be going to school hungry, or lacking nutrition because access to fresh food is restricted due to their remote location.

Recommendation to the Committee

It is not reasonable to expect health to improve in Aboriginal children and young people living in remote communities if there is not a consistent supply of fruit and vegetables available as well as nutrition education that is both accessible and engaging.

EON has a long and successful history over the last two decades of improving food security and nutrition knowledge in the most far-flung and financially disadvantaged parts of our state.

The most effective way to address food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty in remote communities is with a practical, local solution that is delivered in partnership with the community.

We recommend the Thriving Communities Program- which has had proven success- be offered to all disadvantaged remote and very remote schools/communities across Western Australia. This will ensure



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children and young people who live in these communities are not forgotten and receive the fresh food, nutrition education and healthy lifestyle knowledge they need to thrive and fulfil their potential. The contracting out of delivery of this program by government would ensure that it is tailored to each community and school's particular needs.

With the rising cost of living in WA, plus supply issues exacerbated by the pandemic, the issue of food security for Aboriginal children and young people already living in impoverished conditions is now an urgent one.

2016 – 2025 is the United Nations “Decade of Action on Nutrition” and now is the time to act.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide submissions to this important inquiry.