

Adding a Food Security Target to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap

A proposal for a new socioeconomic outcome area and target: Outcome 18 and Target 18

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About this document

Title	Adding a Food Security Target to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap
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This paper is prepared by Jaway, a First Nations led organisation working on food security and community owned food infrastructure. It is not a publication of the Australian Government, any state or territory government, the Joint Council on Closing the Gap or the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations, and it has no formal status under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. It is published to support consultation on a proposed new target. All figures are drawn from the published sources listed in the References section. Feedback is welcome at the contact above.

Jaway acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands and waters on which we work and pays respect to Elders past and present. We thank the communities whose leadership carries this work.

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1 Executive summary

- 1.1** The National Agreement on Closing the Gap is the principal framework through which Australian governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people work together to overcome entrenched inequality. It contains seventeen socioeconomic outcome areas and nineteen targets covering health, education, employment, housing, justice, land and waters, and languages.¹ It contains no outcome area and no target for food security.
- 1.2** The most recent national data show that 41 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households experienced food insecurity in the previous twelve months, compared with 13.2 per cent of all Australian households. In remote areas the figure rises to 51 per cent.^{4,5} Food security underpins nearly every outcome the Agreement already measures. A child cannot learn hungry. A patient cannot heal hungry. A worker cannot hold a job hungry.
- 1.3** This paper proposes that the parties to the National Agreement adopt a new socioeconomic outcome area and target, which would be Outcome 18 and Target 18: that by 2035, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households have secure access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food, with the share of households experiencing food insecurity reduced to parity with the national rate. The proposal includes the measurement framework, an implementation approach built on community controlled food infrastructure, procurement reform, and a food security impact assessment for policy affecting food in First Nations communities.
- 1.4** The Agreement has added targets before. In June 2025 the Joint Council agreed in principle to a new inland waters target, Target 15c, with jurisdictional targets and indicators to be developed in partnership with the Coalition of Peaks.³ The same pathway is available for food. Nothing proposed in this paper requires new institutions. It asks the machinery that already exists to count, report and act on food security in the same way it does for the outcomes the nation has already agreed to measure.

2 Background: the National Agreement on Closing the Gap

- 2.1** The National Agreement on Closing the Gap came into effect in July 2020. Its parties are the Commonwealth, the states and territories, the Australian Local Government Association and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations. It was the first agreement of its kind negotiated directly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives rather than announced to them.¹
- 2.2** The Agreement is built on four Priority Reforms: formal partnerships and shared decision making; building the community controlled sector; transforming government organisations; and shared access to data and information at a regional level. Sitting under the Priority Reforms are seventeen socioeconomic outcome areas, each with one or more national targets, nineteen targets in all. Progress is reported publicly through the Productivity Commission's Closing the Gap Information Repository, and the Productivity Commission reviews the Agreement every three years.^{1,2,8}
- 2.3** Targets are not fixed for the life of the Agreement. The Joint Council on Closing the Gap, which brings together ministers from every jurisdiction and the Coalition of Peaks, can agree to add or refine targets as evidence and priorities develop. In June 2025 the Joint Council agreed in principle to formalise an inland waters target as new Target 15c, with jurisdictional targets and indicators to be developed in partnership arrangements for Joint Council endorsement.³
- 2.4** That precedent matters for this proposal in two ways. First, it confirms that the Agreement can grow where the evidence shows a gap in what is measured. Second, it demonstrates the pathway: agreement in principle at Joint Council, followed by negotiated target wording, indicators and data development with the Coalition of Peaks and the jurisdictions.
- 2.5** This paper proposes that food security follow the same pathway, as a new outcome area and target. Because the existing outcome areas are numbered 1 to 17, the proposal is referred to throughout as Outcome 18 and Target 18.

3 The case for a food security target

- 3.1** The outcomes the Agreement already measures each depend on food. Healthy birthweight, early childhood development, school attainment, employment and life expectancy all assume that households can reliably put nutritious food on the table. Food security is not one outcome among many. It is a condition under which the other outcomes become possible.
- 3.2** Food security is now measured nationally, and the results show one of the widest gaps in Australian social statistics. In the Australian Bureau of Statistics National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey for the 2022 to 2023 financial year, 41 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households experienced food insecurity due to a lack of money for food in the previous twelve months, and 17 per cent experienced severe food insecurity, meaning meals were skipped or days passed without eating.⁴ The comparable figures for all Australian households are 13.2 per cent and 3.4 per cent.⁵

Table 1: Household food insecurity in the previous twelve months, most recent published surveys

Measure	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households (2022 to 2023)	All Australian households (2023)
Experienced food insecurity	41 per cent	13.2 per cent
Experienced severe food insecurity	17 per cent	3.4 per cent
Experienced food insecurity, remote areas	51 per cent	Not separately published
Experienced severe food insecurity, remote areas	23 per cent	Not separately published

Sources: ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey 2022 to 2023 (released November 2024); ABS Food Insecurity 2023, from the National Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey (released September 2025). The all households survey excludes very remote areas and discrete First Nations communities, so the true national gap is wider than the comparison shows.

- 3.3** The gap is compounded by price. The Northern Territory Market Basket Survey found that a healthy food basket cost around 52 per cent more in remote community stores than in a regional supermarket, a finding cited in the Northern Territory Department of Health submission to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission Supermarkets Inquiry.⁶ Households facing the nation's highest food prices are, in the main, the households with the least money for food. Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households with children, 47 per cent experienced food insecurity; among the lowest income households, 66 per cent.⁴

- 3.4** None of this is newly discovered. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs reported on food pricing and food security in remote communities in December 2020, the third parliamentary inquiry into the subject since 2009.⁷ Successive inquiries have documented the problem and recommended action. What the national framework has never done is adopt an obligation: a target, agreed by all parties, measured every year and reported alongside the outcomes it underpins.
- 3.5** The absence has practical consequences. Because food security is not a Closing the Gap target, it has no agreed baseline, no annual reporting obligation, no budget line tied to national progress, and no requirement that any level of government account for whether the situation is improving. Policy activity exists, including store licensing schemes, freight subsidy programs and the development of a national strategy for food security in remote First Nations communities. A strategy without a target, however, sets a direction without an obligation to arrive. A target creates the shared accountability the Agreement was designed to provide.

4 The proposed outcome and target

- 4.1** The proposal follows the structure the National Agreement uses for every existing outcome area: an outcome statement describing the desired state, and a target that is specific, measurable and time bound.

PROPOSED OUTCOME 18 AND TARGET 18

Outcome 18: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and households have secure access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

Target 18: By 2035, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households experiencing food insecurity is reduced to parity with the rate for all Australian households.

Supporting trajectory: By 2030, the proportion of households in remote and very remote First Nations communities experiencing food insecurity is reduced by half against the published baseline of 51 per cent, drawn from the ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey 2022 to 2023.

- 4.2** Two features of the wording are deliberate. The first is parity. The goal is not a special standard for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families but the same food security every other Australian household is assumed to deserve. The second is the phrase culturally appropriate. Food security for First Nations communities includes the ability to hunt, fish, grow and trade traditional foods on country. Access to food and authority over food systems are related but distinct, and the outcome statement is drafted to cover both.
- 4.3** The final wording, including the trajectory and any jurisdictional targets, would be settled through negotiation between governments and the Coalition of Peaks, consistent with the partnership requirements of the Agreement and with the pathway used for the inland waters target.³ The wording above is proposed as the starting point for that negotiation.

5 Measurement and data development

- 5.1** The baseline already exists. The Australian Bureau of Statistics measured household food insecurity in its most recent national health surveys using an internationally recognised survey instrument, providing published national figures for both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households and all Australian households.^{4,5} The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Productivity Commission hold the reporting infrastructure used for every existing target.
- 5.2** The proposal is that food insecurity be measured and reported annually alongside the other Closing the Gap targets, disaggregated by remoteness area, jurisdiction and household composition, so that conditions in remote communities are visible rather than averaged into national figures.
- 5.3** A data development plan would accompany the target. The general population survey currently excludes very remote areas and discrete First Nations communities, which limits like for like comparison in exactly the places where food insecurity is most severe.⁵ Options include extending survey coverage, supplementary collection through community controlled health organisations, and store level price monitoring building on the market basket survey methodology used in the Northern Territory.⁶
- 5.4** Consistent with Priority Reform Four, data collection and governance would be shared with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, and communities would have access to the data about their own food systems, collected with them and returned to them.¹

6 Implementation mechanisms

- 6.1 A community controlled food infrastructure fund.** The primary delivery mechanism proposed is a fund through which communities apply for capital works they design and will own, including cold storage and cold chain infrastructure, farms and market gardens, community stores, fishing and processing infrastructure, and food hubs. Projects would be costed and evidenced before funding, and the assets would be held by community controlled organisations. The fund would pay for assets communities keep rather than programs departments run, consistent with the Agreement's commitment to building the community controlled sector. Corporate participation could be structured alongside public funding, including through Reconciliation Action Plan commitments.
- 6.2 Procurement reform.** Government and corporate procurement of food, freight and catering in and near First Nations communities moves substantial sums each year. The proposal is that buying rules weight community owned suppliers for these contracts, that such contracts count toward Indigenous procurement policies at every level of government, and that agencies report the community food outcomes of their buying. This applies existing procurement policy architecture to food security rather than creating new machinery.
- 6.3 A food security impact assessment.** Decisions on remote store licensing, freight routes and subsidies, fuel and energy pricing, water licensing and essential services all affect what food costs and whether it arrives. The proposal is a standing requirement that policy materially affecting food in First Nations communities be assessed for its effect on food security before adoption, with the assessment published. Comparable assessment requirements already operate in other domains, and the mechanism asks a single question: whether the decision makes it easier or harder for families in the affected communities to afford and access nutritious food.

7 Alignment with the Priority Reforms

7.1 The proposal is an application of the Agreement's existing logic rather than an addition to it. Against each Priority Reform:

- **Priority Reform One, formal partnerships and shared decision making.** The target would be negotiated with the Coalition of Peaks and governed through the Joint Council, following the pathway already used for new targets.
- **Priority Reform Two, building the community controlled sector.** The infrastructure fund would flow through community controlled organisations, growing the sector the Agreement commits to strengthening.
- **Priority Reform Three, transforming government organisations.** Procurement reform and the impact assessment change how departments make decisions that affect food in First Nations communities.
- **Priority Reform Four, shared access to data and information.** The measurement framework gives communities the data about their own food systems, with shared governance of collection and use.

7.2 It is open to governments to take the view that the list of targets is already long. The consequence of that position should be stated plainly: the national framework would continue to measure the downstream outcomes of food insecurity, in health, education and employment, while declining to measure food insecurity itself. This paper puts the contrary view: that a framework designed to close gaps should count one of the widest gaps on the published record.

8 Cost and funding path

- 8.1** Three of the four elements of this proposal operate at marginal cost. Measurement uses surveys and reporting infrastructure that already exist. The impact assessment uses policy processes governments already run in other domains. Procurement reform redirects spending that already occurs.
- 8.2** The substantive funding decision is the community controlled food infrastructure fund. This paper does not propose a fund size. An initial commitment would properly be settled through negotiation between governments and the Coalition of Peaks, informed by the pipeline of community designed projects and by jurisdictional need, and could be structured to attract corporate participation alongside public money.
- 8.3** The relevant comparison for any such commitment is the cost of the status quo. Food insecurity drives avoidable expenditure through the health system and undermines the substantial public investment already made in education, employment and remote services. Capital invested in community owned food infrastructure is retained as community wealth and continues to produce food security benefits after the initial outlay, which programs and subsidies do not.

9 Consultation and next steps

9.1 This paper recommends that:

- the Joint Council on Closing the Gap agree in principle to a food security target and refer the wording in section 4 for negotiation with the Coalition of Peaks, following the pathway used for the inland waters target;
- the Commonwealth commission continued measurement of household food insecurity in the next national health survey cycle, with annual reporting alongside the existing targets; and
- state and territory governments, in partnership with communities that hold mapped and costed food infrastructure projects, pilot the infrastructure fund and procurement reforms ahead of national adoption.

9.2 Jaway is consulting publicly on this proposal and maintains a public petition in support of a food security target at jaway.org.au. Signatures, together with feedback on this paper, will accompany the proposal when it is put to members of the Joint Council.

9.3 The National Agreement promises that decisions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives will be made with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. On food, many communities have already made their decisions: what to grow, what to catch, what to build and who should own it. The question this paper puts to the parties is whether the national framework will count what those communities already know.

References

1. National Agreement on Closing the Gap, July 2020, closingthegap.gov.au.
2. Closing the Gap targets and outcomes, closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/targets; Productivity Commission, Closing the Gap Information Repository.
3. Joint Council on Closing the Gap, Communique, 20 June 2025, closingthegap.gov.au.
4. Australian Bureau of Statistics, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey, 2022 to 2023 financial year, released November 2024. Food insecurity figures: 41 per cent of households experienced food insecurity due to a lack of money for food in the previous twelve months; 17 per cent experienced severe food insecurity; in remote areas, 51 per cent and 23 per cent respectively; households with children, 47 per cent; lowest income households, 66 per cent.
5. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Food Insecurity, 2023, from the National Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey, released September 2025. 13.2 per cent of all Australian households experienced food insecurity; 3.4 per cent experienced severe food insecurity. The survey excludes very remote areas and discrete First Nations communities.
6. Northern Territory Market Basket Survey, 2021, as cited in the Northern Territory Department of Health submission to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission Supermarkets Inquiry.
7. House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, Report on food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities, December 2020.
8. Productivity Commission, Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Study Report, February 2024.

Figures were checked against the published releases in July 2026. This document remains a consultation draft pending external review.