

Inquiry Submission Briefing Document

Victorian Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee

Introduction

Submission dates: 3rd June – 26th July

Making a submission: By completing the form on the parliamentary website:

<https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/foodsecurityinquiry/submissions>

Terms of Reference (ToR):

The Committee will inquire into, consider and report, by 14 November 2024, on the impacts and drivers of, and solutions for, food security in Victoria, including but not limited to –

1. *the impact of food insecurity in Victoria, on –*
 - i. *physical and mental health;*
 - ii. *poverty and hardship; and*
2. *options available to lower the cost of food and improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food.*

About this inquiry

The [Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria](#) is being undertaken by the Legal and Social Issues Committee (LSC, Legislative Council), which focuses on issues related to community services, health, education, and justice. Sustain advocated for a broad 'Victorian food systems inquiry'. The [motion for the Inquiry](#) was moved by [Sarah Mansfield](#), Member for Western Victoria (Victorian Greens).

Whereas the concurrent Lower House [Environment and Planning Committee inquiry is focused on food supply and availability](#), the LSC Inquiry centres around the impacts of food insecurity, as well as access to and affordability of food.

Contents and suggested submission structure

This document provides information on what could be included in a submission, as well as a suggested structure for submissions. **It is not meant as a document that can be copy/pasted.** Submissions that look similar can sometime be lumped together and counted as one submission. **We strongly recommend making your submission specific and unique, either as individual entities, or as networks or coalitions.** The structure could include:

1. **Recommendations**
2. **Impacts of food insecurity**
3. **Drivers of food insecurity**
4. **Evidence-based initiatives**

Suggested submission structure and content

1. Recommendations

It is important to have a **clear and concise list of the key recommendations** you are making at the top of the submission. This makes it easy for the Committee members to focus on what key actions you are seeking from the Committee in their report and from the government to whom their report is directed. Bear in mind that members may only be skimming through each submission and may miss your recommendations if they are left to the end. Evidence and justification for your recommendations can be outlined in the following sections.

Below is a list of some of the **key food systems and food security recommendations** contained within the [Victorian Food System Consensus Statement](#) and other comprehensive research papers published in the last few years as related to the inquiry ToR.

We **strongly suggest you also include more specific recommendations** that are relevant to your organisation, sector, geographical area and / or community.

Governance

That the State government:

- Creates an enabling policy environment to transform Victoria's food system by legislating the right to food in Victoria and embedding it into all relevant State and Local Government policies, budgeting processes and activities.
- Commits to designing, implementing and evaluating a Victorian Food Systems Strategy and Investment Plan, integrating a rights-based and systems-based approach to meaningfully address food insecurity
 - Establishes a Committee to oversee the design, implementation and evaluation of a Victorian Food Systems Strategy and Investment Plan.
 - Ensures that the design and implementation of the Strategy and the Plan allow for meaningful engagement with a diverse range of stakeholders and community members, including those with lived experience of food insecurity and producers.
- Supports First Nations communities with policy and resources to advance their goals and aspirations for their food sovereignty
- Empowers local government to lead the participatory development of community food systems strategies via provision of financial and supporting resources.
- Resources a comprehensive food systems and monitoring framework, including the use of best-practice survey instruments including the USDA 18-item food security survey to measure prevalence of household food insecurity
- Revises the Victorian planning provisions legislation (*Planning & Environment Act 1987*) to mandate health as a consideration when local governments and other planning authorities are making planning decisions
- Recognises that emergency food relief is not a solution to food insecurity

Food Supply, Production, and a Circular Food Economy

That the State government:

- Facilitates a pragmatic and well-planned transition to forms of food production that will nourish generations to come, such as regenerative agriculture / agroecology.
- Works with local governments, food producers and community organisations to decentralise food production, storage, and retail options, for example via the expansion of local markets and regional food hubs
- Strengthens local and regional food production to mitigate and reduce reliance on imported food products
- Works with local governments, food producers and community organisations to diversify the Victorian food system, including locations of production, storage, retail and distribution networks; the scale of enterprises involved in the systems; and increased biodiversity – crops, forestry, livestock
- Works with local governments, food producers and community organisations to strengthen Victoria's circular economy, building on the substantial work already underway led by Sustainability Victoria and its many partners

Food Access

That the State government:

- Advocates to the Federal Government to increase income support payments, including Jobseeker, to above the poverty line and indexed to wage growth, consistent with a rights-based and income-first approach to food security
- Legislates food as a human right and works towards its progressive realisation, ensuring that all Victorians, especially the people who experience the biggest barriers to food security, have equitable access to healthy, sustainable, and culturally appropriate food at all times
- Continues to resource the FoodBank [school breakfast club program](#), with a medium-long term outlook to create a state based initiative that provides all Victorian public school children with a healthy, locally procured breakfast to ensure that they are nourished and able to reach their full potential
- Develops, implements and coordinates public sector food procurement programs to support local, regenerative and agroecologically managed farms
- Comprehensively resources the emergency food relief sector during the transition to a new food system paradigm. Re-establishing and resourcing [Victorian Food Relief Taskforce](#) would be a good initial step
- Collaborates with the education sector to develop comprehensive and practical food literacy programs
- Collaborates with service recipients to create dignified models of food relief
- Implements a supplemental nutrition program for pregnant women, infants and young children to ensure food and supplements are available in the vital period of early childhood, similar to Women Infant and Children program (USA) and Healthy Start (UK), in collaboration with Maternal and Child Health Services

Specific recommendations (examples)

- Food relief – more funding, volunteer hours tied to job seeker requirements, resourcing of existing networks such as the [Geelong Food Assistance Network](#)
- Local governments – funding for specific projects/initiatives, funding for monitoring and evaluation, recognition of food as related to climate, health, community resilience, etc

Food pricing and affordability

That the State government:

- Support the recommendations of report of the Federal Senate Select Committee following its Inquiry into supermarket prices, including:
 - **Recommendation 2:** amend s.46 of the Competition and Consumer Act 2010 to prohibit the charging of excess prices (otherwise known as price gouging)
 - **Recommendation 3:** establish a Commission on Prices and Competition to examine prices and price setting practices of industries across the economy, including monitoring and investigating supermarket prices and price setting practices
- Supports the passage of the *Supermarket Industry Bill (2024)* which will bring supermarkets under the coverage of the Essential Services Commission Act 2001 as a regulated industry
- Enables the Essential Services Commission to monitor and report on the retail sale prices offered by supermarkets for essential grocery items, in particular fresh fruit and vegetables
- Enables the Essential Services Commission to investigate and report on profit margins for supermarkets in relation to essential grocery items
- Enables the Essential Services Commission to designate a prescribed price for an essential grocery item offered for sale by a supermarket in Victoria

2. Impacts of food insecurity

Overview

This section will be vital for your submission. Council and community food relief organisations will have valuable data sets that demonstrate the severe effects that food insecurity is having on our communities. The State government has not done any monitoring of food security since the [Victorian population survey in 2022](#). In this section, we suggest that you describe the impacts of food insecurity and related data on health, poverty, and other socioeconomic factors, with an emphasis on any local / regional data that you have or may be able to access. This will help highlight how food insecurity is central to many social challenges Victorians are facing.

Types of data

You could reference either or both of qualitative and quantitative data sets in this section (below). Try to use data sets from within the last 5 years. When using older data, it's important to highlight that the cost-of-living crisis, COVID-19, and other global issues have negatively impacted food security since those data sources were recorded.

Some examples of each include:

Quantitative

- Internal (council or organisation) community survey statistics
- [Victorian Population Health Survey 2022](#) (food insecurity is under the social determinants tab)
- [VCOSS economic disadvantage map data](#) for your region/community
- [Population ID](#)
- [Australian Urban Observatory](#) – it is free to create an account; data available at LGA level for free but a license is required to see visualisations at postcode or neighbourhood level
- [ABS data](#) (statistics on income, health are appropriate)
- Statistics from any other recent research reports
- [FoodBank Hunger Report](#) which has several statistics specific to Victoria
- Poverty Lines report- highlights income support payments relative to poverty line each quarter (latest data from Dec 2023 available [here](#))

Qualitative

- Stories from your community
- Quotes from community members, council staff that work in the sector, food relief organisations, etc

Types of impacts of food security on health and wellbeing

The inquiry specifically looks at the following impacts:

- Mental health – community connection, feeling valued, rates of anxiety and depression
- Physical health – rates of cardiovascular and other noncommunicable, diet related diseases, obesity, malnutrition,
- Standard of living, poverty, hardship – rates of people losing secure housing, working overtime to afford to live, % of people living below the Henderson poverty line, other economic disadvantage statistics

Useful resources regarding the impacts of food insecurity

- [Report](#): Understanding food insecurity in Australia
- [Study](#): An investigation of structural violence in the lived experience of food insecurity
- [Study](#): Walking the Food Security Tightrope—Exploring the Experiences of Low-to-Middle Income Melbourne Households
- [Study](#): Perspectives of Food Insecurity and Service Delivery amongst Emergency Food Relief Clients in a Regional City in Victoria, Australia
- [Study](#) highlighting link between food insecurity and mental stress and depression
- [Study](#) looking at food security among university students during COVID-19
- [Study](#) exploring experiences of government actions on the social determinants of food security during COVID-19

3. Drivers of food insecurity

There are many intertwining drivers of food insecurity. From the list below, some may be relevant to your community/sector. Choose any that you would like to speak to, particularly if you have data that backs them.

There is a brief outline of how each driver affects food insecurity that you could use, add to, or write your own. Additionally, several links can be found under each driver for articles or evidence sources that you may use if you do not have your own. It is imperative that these drivers be linked back to the recommendations that the State government could implement.

Note: Submissions that look too similar can sometimes be grouped together and counted as one, so it is important to make your submissions specific and not a copy/paste of this template.

Current economic paradigm – profit over people

The current economic system puts profit before people's health, wellbeing, and livelihoods. Australia has one of the most concentrated supermarket sectors in the world which has enabled them to price gouge consumers and dictate unconscionable business deals with producers. This leads to high levels of food insecurity with many unable to afford enough food, let alone a nutritious, culturally appropriate diet.

This is demonstrated by the \$1.1b and \$1.6b profits posted by Coles and Woolworths respectively last year amidst a cost-of-living crisis that is pushing millions of Australians into poverty, housing stress and food insecurity. As a clear indicator of the crisis, [Foodbank's 2023 Hunger Report](#) (2023) found that 3.7 million households (36%) 'experienced moderate to severe food insecurity'.

The neoliberal market logic that the government has based Australia's economic and competition policy on is inherently flawed. It assumes that when government regulation is removed, and the market (corporations) are allowed to regulate themselves, this will create strong competition and prices will be fair and just. Instead, we see corporations gaining more and more market dominance; the supermarket duopoly now controls more than 70% of the food retail market. Globally, just four companies control 80% of the agrichemical industry, and similarly for the seed industry. When corporate concentration increases, prices become less competitive, leading to consumers paying high prices and farmers receiving lower returns for their work.

Here are a few resources on corporate concentration, and neoliberal market economics in the agricultural sector.

[Institute of agriculture and trade policy – Corporate Concentration](#)

[The Natural Farmer – concentration and power in the food system](#)

[Jennifer Clapp - The rise of big food and agriculture: corporate influence in the food system](#)

[Sustain's federal supermarket inquiry submission](#)

[Food security and neoliberalism in Australia](#)

[IA article - food and neoliberalism](#)

[The Conversation article – Hunger in the lucky country](#)

[The Conversation article – Successful failures: the problem with food banks](#)

Cost of living crisis compounding years of inadequate social protection in Australia

We are currently facing unprecedented levels of food insecurity amidst the worst cost of living crisis in recent memory.

These cost of living pressures are a primary cause of the heartbreaking [21% rise in foodbank distributions](#), with demand for food relief growing every month. [In 2022, 2 million Victorians experience severe food insecurity, defined by the United Nations](#) as a person or household running out of food and going an entire day without food at least once in a year. This includes, [over 365,000 children in Victoria, drastically impacting their ability to engage and learn at school](#). Food Bank data shows [that 70% of those facing food insecurity](#) also experience high levels of psychological distress, particularly the parents of those food insecure children.

The cost-of-living crisis has been driven by multiple factors, including the economic paradigm detailed above, interest rate rises, inflation, corporate profits tax avoidance, stagnation of wages, and welfare income currently below the poverty line, all of which see concentration of wealth in an ever-decreasing number of pockets. Due to the rising cost of food, housing, and other essential human needs, people are now having to choose between healthcare and a healthy diet; between paying rent and giving their kids a nutritious lunchbox.

[The Conversation article – food price crisis and government response](#)

[FoodBank – food insecurity and the cost-of-living crisis](#)

[The Greens – Cost of living crisis](#)

[Welfare income below the poverty line](#)

Climate

The climate catastrophe is wreaking havoc with the agriculture. Shortening of growing season as well as the increasing incidence of fires, floods, frosts, and drought make growing food in our region increasingly challenging. This may result in lower yields, damaged crops, lower food profitability and may lead to an associated rise in the price of food.

Current industrial agricultural practices are a leading cause of emissions in Australia, resulting in a situation in which farmers are sabotaging themselves – they generate unnecessary emissions causing global warming, which then leads to the extreme weather events described above.

This is not however, the fault of farmers, with many encouraged and locked into these modes of farming by government policy, corporations and the neoliberal economic paradigm described earlier in this section. For example, the government and corporate promotion of synthetic fertilisers increased yields and efficiency from the Green Revolution until now. However, the production and use of these fertilisers is one of the main agricultural greenhouse gas emitters.

While greenhouse gas emissions have always been a part of agriculture, a shift to agroecological and regenerative practices, as well as localising food has been demonstrated to greatly reduce emissions and play an important role in sequestering carbon.

[Department of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forests – Climate Change and the Agriculture Sector](#)

[CSIRO carbon sequestration](#)

[Western Australia Government – Carbon Farming](#)

[American Farmland Trust – Climate Change and Regenerative Agriculture](#)

[University of Vermont – Using Regenerative Agriculture to Combat Climate Change](#)

[Journal of Agrarian Change – Industrial Capitalist Agriculture](#)

Ecological degradation/loss of biodiversity

In addition to climate related farming challenges from industrialised agriculture, many of the associated practices (using synthetic fertilisers, pesticides, using heavy machinery, etc) have led to ecological degradation, loss of biodiversity, and poor-quality soil. For instance, the use of synthetic fertilisers heavily reduces the soils microbial and nutrient content of the soil. This creates a reliance on using more and more agrochemicals to maintain yields. This results in farmers spending more money on agrochemical inputs, and therefore driving up the price of food and/or putting more financial stress on farmer.

[FoodPrint – The impacts of industrial agriculture on soil health](#)

[Australian Organic – Soil Health Position](#)

[ABC – Soil Health and Fertiliser Prices](#)

4. Evidence based initiatives

Local programs that have been successful

Here you could outline projects/programs that you are involved with or know of that have been successful. This section is vital to highlight that we already have many of the solutions and they need to be expanded and resourced by the government to enable improved access to healthy, nutritious food.

Barriers to implementation / expansion of food security initiatives

Outline what is currently inhibiting the implementation or expansion of the initiatives described above. These could include:

- Funding constraints (be specific)
- Lack of training and education
- Lack of non-monetary support/resources
- Lack of coordination

Best practice food systems governance models and strategies

Below are some evidence-based, best practice models and strategies that your submission could point to as evidence that the recommendations above are feasible and effective.

- [Scotland Good Food Nation](#)
- [Belo-Horizonte](#)
- [Vermont F2P](#)
- [Brighton & Hove Local Food Strategy](#)
- [NSW EPC report recommendations](#)
- [Mornington Peninsula Food Economy and Agroecology Strategy](#)