



## ARACY Submission

Submission to the National Food  
Security Strategy Discussion Paper



every child thriving  
**aracy**



## About ARACY

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) works to ensure that every child and young person in Australia has the opportunity to thrive. We bring research, practice, policy, and young people together to drive systemic change.

ARACY pioneered *The Nest*, Australia's evidence-based national wellbeing framework across six domains. In this submission we focus on the Material Basics and Healthy domains, recognising nutrition as inseparable from broader wellbeing. *The Nest* provides a practical tool to centre child and youth wellbeing within a whole-of-system approach, aligning directly with the strategy's proposed framework [1].

Our Young and Wise program, delivered with support from the Australian Government Department of Health, Disability, and Ageing embeds youth voice in policy design. The Young and Wise Nutrition Roundtable (May 2025; 15 young people aged 14–24) was held in partnership with the Department to explore young people's perspectives surrounding food security and healthy eating. Across the Young and Wise main report (consultations with more than 10,000 children and young people), food, nutrition, healthy eating, fruit and vegetables were mentioned more than 70 times. This shows that young people consistently frame food and nutrition as central to their ability to thrive, not as isolated concerns [2][3].

While ARACY's Young and Wise initiatives elevate adolescent voices, these insights highlight the importance of protecting children's food security across the life course. Investments in good nutrition during the early years must be safeguarded and sustained through middle childhood, adolescence, and into young adulthood to deliver consistent wellbeing outcomes.

## Executive Summary

Food security is a systems challenge that demands a whole-of-government and whole-of-community response. It is not only about diet: it cuts across health, education, productivity, participation, and climate resilience.

Young people are clear about what would enable them to thrive:

- make healthy food realistically affordable,
- teach practical cooking skills without stigma,
- ensure universal, stigma-free school meals, and
- design clearer labelling they can trust [2].

ARACY's Young and Wise Nutrition Roundtable and related initiatives demonstrate young people's capacity to generate solutions. They described trade-offs when food is unaffordable,

including skipping meals, relying on low-cost processed options, or being unable to buy fresh produce, and then proposed reforms such as subsidised or free school meals, affordable “imperfect produce” programs, youth-friendly food labelling, and hands-on cooking and budgeting education [2][3].

These insights align with wider evidence:

- In 2022, only 4.3 per cent of children met both fruit and vegetable recommendations, with 96 per cent not meeting the vegetable guideline and 36 per cent not meeting the fruit guideline [4][5].
- Families with children are experiencing the steepest cost-of-living pressures, with food and housing key drivers [6][7].
- Climate change is undermining resilience, with farm profits down 23 per cent since 2000 [8]. UNICEF projects disasters will impose over \$100 billion in costs to children and young people by 2060 [9].
- The National Climate Risk Assessment identifies food systems as highly exposed to shocks, disproportionately affecting children and First Nations communities [10].
- Food insecurity is particularly acute in First Nation communities, where inadequate housing and cooking facilities, high food costs in remote stores, and fragmented supply systems drive malnutrition [11].
- The Tasmanian School Lunch Project demonstrated that universal provision increased vegetable intake, reduced stigma, and improved inclusion and classroom calm [12].
- This submission also aligns with the National Preventive Health Strategy 2021–2030, which identifies healthy nutrition and supportive environments as core enablers of prevention. Embedding food security into prevention frameworks ensures affordability, resilience, and equity are addressed systemically [13].

To address these issues, ARACY recommends that the National Food Security Strategy should:

1. Embed youth agency as a guiding principle.
2. Adopt a long-term, intergenerational timeframe.
3. Scale approaches that already work, such as stigma-free school meals.
4. Prioritise affordability and equity, with culturally strong, community-led delivery.
5. Recognise school meals as national infrastructure.
6. Embed food skills education across schools and communities.
7. Guarantee climate resilience for child and youth food security.
8. Establish cross-government accountability for outcomes.

By embedding youth voice, aligning with wellbeing frameworks, and linking food security with broader material basics, the strategy can reduce inequities and create intergenerational benefits in health, education, justice, and productivity.

## Responses to the Discussion Paper Questions

### 1. What other principles should government, industry and community prioritise to support the development of the strategy and why are these important?

The discussion paper identifies four strong guiding principles, while emphasising that food security must be addressed through a whole-of-system approach, recognising the interconnections between health, education, social services, agriculture, and community outcomes. ARACY recommends adding a fifth principle: youth agency and participation. Children and young people must be seen as active contributors within this system, not passive recipients of programs. Embedding their voices in governance strengthens accountability across portfolios and ensures reforms are designed with a lens of intergenerational fairness. Young people's lived experiences show why this perspective is essential: the way food is priced, labelled, and spoken about cuts across domains and affects not only diets, but also participation, mental health, and equity. If the Department is seeking organisations already engaged in this work, ARACY is well placed to support the continuation and scaling of youth-led co-design. Our Young and Wise Nutrition Roundtable illustrates how structured, youth-centred processes can directly inform policy design and delivery.

We also recommend that equity must explicitly recognise First Nation leadership in food security solutions. Partnering with ACCOs and ACCHOs is essential to ensure delivery is culturally safe, grounded in community agency, and self-determination.

#### *Evidence*

- ARACY's Young and Wise Report engaged over 10,000 children and young people nationally; food and nutrition were mentioned approximately 73 times. Young people consistently said they wanted to eat well and recognised the link between healthy food and their wellbeing. This shows food security is not a side issue but a structural determinant of whether children and young people can thrive [2].
- ARACY's Young and Wise Nutrition Roundtable highlighted stigma-free school meals, clearer labelling, and food skills to address food security, affordability, and healthier eating [3].
  - This initiative was co-designed in partnership with the Department of Health and Aged Care. Fifteen young Australians aged 14–24, from diverse geographic and cultural backgrounds, were invited to provide insights on what influences their eating habits and what's missing from current policy.
  - Young people called for strength-based, not deficit-based, approaches to wellbeing and healthy food delivery, noting “When you start to say... ‘this is a bad food’ or ‘don’t eat this’... it demonises food... food is fuel” (p.7).
  - Participants also noted how poorly framed ‘healthy eating’ messages can harm mental health. “...Healthy eating can become actively bad for your mental health at a certain point,

if it becomes like an obsession... these foods are considered good, but the behaviours and attitudes around them aren't" (p.7).

- Agency matters as much as access. Young people consistently called for involvement in program design (e.g. labelling, school meals, affordability solutions). Embedding youth governance aligns with the principle of collaboration across systems, ensuring accountability and preventing fragmented delivery.
- International analysis positions universal school meals as part of a mission-oriented approach that advances equity and intergenerational fairness [14].
- The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children highlights the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in child protection and calls for system reform that addresses structural inequities, including food security [16]

## 2. What timeframe should the strategy work towards – short (1 to 2 years), medium (5 to 10 years) or long (10-plus years) term, and why?

A successful strategy must balance immediate relief with long-term change. Young people want action now to make healthy food affordable, but they also want confidence that future generations will not face worsening climate shocks, higher costs, or fragmented programs. The strategy should deliver short-term measures, build scalable programs in the medium term, and embed resilience for the long term.

- Short term (1–2 years): Pilot stigma-free school meals, provide youth-friendly labelling explainers, embed cooking and budgeting programs in schools.
- Medium term (5–10 years): Scale school meal programs nationally, embed food skills education into curricula, and publish youth-focused food security indicators.
- Long term (10+ years): Integrate food security into climate adaptation, wellbeing measurement, and intergenerational equity frameworks.

### Evidence

- The Tasmanian School Lunch Project improved diet quality (more vegetables, less discretionary food) and reduced stigma by making meals universal [12].
  - Teachers reported calmer classrooms and stronger engagement in schools where meals were provided
- The Young and Wise Nutrition Roundtable signalled that affordability pressures are immediate, but require long-term structural solutions. [3]
  - "...Youth Allowance or Job seeker, they don't keep up with inflation. So it leaves young people with limited food options and budget options...I go towards things like instant noodles because, you know, that's what I can afford" (p. 15).
  - "I think if you can afford to eat healthy of course you're going to consider it, but with the state of prices it's a lot more on young people's minds than it was before" (p. 15).

- 61% of participants shared they have previously skipped a meal due to the cost of food.
- The Mission-Oriented Approach to School Meals (Mazzucato & Doyle, 2025) confirms that school meals should be treated as long-term infrastructure. When positioned within industrial strategy, they generate economic multipliers, build resilience, and deliver returns across health, education, agriculture, and productivity [14].
- UNICEF projects climate disasters will impose over \$100 billion in costs to children by 2060 without stronger resilience planning [9].
- The National Climate Risk Assessment identifies food systems as at risk from climate shocks, with long-term consequences for affordability and nutrition [10].

### 3. Are there examples of current or planned initiatives by you or your organisation to improve food security in your sector?

Young and Wise participants highlighted that effective solutions already exist in Australia, but they are not consistently available to children and young people. These initiatives directly strengthen food security by improving affordability, access, and skills. The strategy should build on these models and scale them nationally. Young people identified affordability, stigma and access as barriers, and pointed to initiatives such as:

- compulsory cooking classes,
- youth-friendly labelling,
- discounted “imperfect produce” channels, and
- universal school meals.

Each of these links directly to food security’s four pillars: availability, access, utilisation, and stability [7].

#### *Evidence*

- Young and Wise Nutrition Roundtable (2025): Youth priorities included affordability, stigma-free meals, food skills, and labelling [3]. Participants further noted:
  - Cooking classes in schools build utilisation and long-term food security. “I did cooking ed at school and learnt how to cook eggs, pasta, chicken... prior to this I had no cooking experience so it was pretty life changing” (p. 21).
  - Young people stressed that hands-on food education equips them with the skills to choose, prepare, and enjoy healthy meals, turning access into sustained wellbeing.
  - Participants emphasised that providing free or low-cost meals in schools reduces stigma, ensures no child misses out due to cost, and creates equal access to nutritious food across diverse communities.
  - Young people supported supermarket initiatives like Woolworths’ Odd Bunch and Coles’ I’m Perfect, but noted inconsistent availability. They suggested embedding

these schemes in schools, youth organisations, and community co-ops to increase reach and reliability, alongside improving affordability and reducing food waste.

- Tasmanian School Lunch Project (2024): Children ate more vegetables, stigma was reduced, teachers observed calmer classrooms, and families reported reduced food insecurity [12].
- ARACY's Wellbeing Wheel is a practical way of conceptualising *The Nest* as an ecological model places the child at the centre and illustrates how wellbeing outcomes depend on secure material basics, health, and supportive family, community, and system contexts. Embedding this perspective would strengthen the strategy's current diagram by making explicit the need to keep children and young people at the centre of food security policy. We will provide a copy of the *Wellbeing Wheel* in the appendix to support alignment with the discussion paper's model [1].

#### 4. Do the proposed key priority areas and whole of system considerations adequately represent the actions needed for an effective food security strategy? If not, what is missing?

The discussion paper's three priorities and five cross-cutting considerations provide a strong foundation. ARACY's Young and Wise consultations suggest the strategy should place greater emphasis on affordability, equity, resilience, and productivity. These dimensions are structural levers: they determine whether children and young people can consistently access nutritious food. Other research highlights whether food security efforts can withstand future economic and climate shocks. This will ensure the strategy addresses both immediate cost pressures and long-term structural risks.

##### *Evidence*

- Competition and cost of living: Families with children face the steepest increases in living costs, with food a key driver [6, 7].
- Young people in the Young and Wise Nutrition Roundtable (2025) consistently highlighted that affordability and access are decisive in shaping their food choices. Without intervention, immediate pressures like inflation and inadequate income supports will continue to push young people towards cheap processed options or skipping meals [3].
- Productivity and innovation: Poor nutrition undermines education and workforce readiness, while school meals and food skills build human capital [2, 11, 14].
- Resilient supply chains and climate: ABARES shows climate pressures have cut farm profits by 23% since 2000 [8]. UNICEF projects over \$100 billion in future costs to children without adaptation [9]. The National Climate Risk Assessment highlights food systems as highly exposed to shocks [10].
- People and equity: Universal meal provision in Tasmania reduced stigma, supported families, and demonstrated stronger outcomes through school–community partnerships [12].

- Research highlights food insecurity in First Nations communities is compounded by systemic barriers including poor housing infrastructure, high food prices, and fragmented supply chains, requiring investment in subsidised staples, land availability, and community-controlled supply models [11].

## 5. What actions could the strategy take to address challenges under each key priority area?

Young people have been clear: practical solutions exist and must be scaled. The Young and Wise Nutrition Roundtable showed that children and young people consistently prioritised universal access to stigma-free meals, practical food skills, clearer food labelling, affordability measures, and youth involvement in governance. These insights align with evidence that the Strategy should explicitly target price barriers for children and young people through universal or low-cost school meals and healthy-staples relief, delivered via schools, youth organisations and co-ops. It should embed equity and cultural safety by making stigma-free delivery the default and partnering with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and community leaders to ensure culturally strong solutions. Food supports must also be recognised as critical food security infrastructure, with continuity built into disaster and climate adaptation plans so children are not left behind in crises. Finally, the strategy should treat school meals, food skills and youth-friendly nutrition information as investments in human capital, strengthening children’s learning, wellbeing and workforce readiness, while securing long-term national resilience through healthier diets.

### *Evidence*

- School meals: ARACY’s Young and Wise Nutrition Roundtable as well as the Tasmanian School Lunch Project highlight universal meals as effective, stigma-free interventions that improve diet quality, classroom participation and inclusion, while supporting community employment [2][12].
- Cooking and budgeting education: Young people want these skills embedded in schools and community settings, equipping young people with lifelong capabilities for health and participation [3].
- Food labelling: Young people requested clearer explanations of the Health Star Rating, co-designed with youth for trust and comprehension [2].
- Affordability measures: Healthy staples relief and “imperfect produce” initiatives can reduce costs and waste, aligning with young people’s calls for affordable healthy food [7]
- Community-led delivery: Connected Beginnings demonstrates that nutrition support in maternal and child health build protective factors in early years, with 65% of families reporting improved access to culturally appropriate services [15].
- The National Climate Risk Assessment confirms that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples face disproportionate risks from climate change, including impacts on health,



housing, and food and water security, compounded by displacement and threats to connection with Country [14].

## 6. What actions could the strategy take to address challenges under these whole-of-system considerations?

Food security cannot be solved through supply and trade alone. A whole-of-system approach is required that embeds health and wellbeing, equity, cultural safety, inclusion, climate resilience, and productivity. For children and young people, this means programs must do more than fill hunger gaps: they must reduce stigma, respect cultural identity, respond to diverse needs, and ensure continuity during crises. Food security should also be treated as an investment in human capital, strengthening learning, workforce readiness and long-term national resilience.

### *Evidence*

- Health and nutrition: Only 4.3 per cent of children meet both fruit and vegetable recommendations; universal school meals improve nutrition and wellbeing [4][5][12].
- Equity and culture: Universal school lunch provision reduced stigma and supported children experiencing food insecurity [12]. The National Climate Risk Assessment highlights that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples face disproportionate risks to food and water security, reinforcing the need for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation leadership [14].
- Climate resilience: Climate shocks are undermining farm productivity and disproportionately impact children's wellbeing and future costs [8][9][10].
- Productivity and innovation: Embedding school food and food skills education builds human capital, strengthens workforce readiness, and contributes to long-term prosperity [2][3][14].

## General Comments

Food security is tied not only to health but to dignity, participation and identity. Young people have told us that when food is unaffordable, the impacts are felt socially and emotionally as well as physically [2][3]. Ensuring access to nutritious food is therefore about enabling them to belong, contribute and thrive.

Food security requires shared responsibility. School meal programs show how governments, schools, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and communities can deliver culturally strong, effective solutions that also generate employment. These challenges reflect system-level failures, not individual or family deficits. Over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection is closely tied to poverty, housing conditions and malnutrition, which underscores the need for coordinated, cross-system action [11, 15].

Climate change must be recognised as a system-defining driver of food security. The National Climate Risk Assessment confirms food systems are highly exposed to climate shocks, and children will bear disproportionate costs without action [10]. School meals and community food supports should be treated as part of national resilience infrastructure.

Finally, food security is a national productivity issue. Poor childhood nutrition undermines education and workforce readiness, while prevention through school meals and food skills delivers long-term returns across health, justice, and productivity [7][8][9].

## Recommendations

1. Youth agency must be embedded as a guiding principle. Children and young people should be recognised as co-designers of food security solutions [2, 3, 13].
2. The strategy must adopt a long-term, intergenerational timeframe. Immediate affordability measures must be combined with structural reform and climate resilience [9, 10].
3. The strategy should scale approaches that already work, building on youth-led codesign and stigma-free universal meals should be expanded nationally [2, 3, 12].
4. Affordability and equity must be treated as core priorities. Policy action should address cost-of-living pressures and ensure community-led delivery [6, 7, 12].
5. School meals should be recognised as national infrastructure. Universal provision should be treated as a health, education, and productivity intervention [11, 14].
6. Food skills education must be embedded across schools and communities. Practical cooking and budgeting skills will equip children and young people with lifelong capabilities [2, 3, 11].
7. Climate resilience must be guaranteed. Continuity of school meals and community supports should be planned into adaptation frameworks [8, 9, 10].
8. Cross-government accountability must be established. Agriculture, Health, Education, Social Services and Climate portfolios should share responsibility [1, 12].

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## Appendix

### ARACY's Wellbeing Wheel

The Nest Wellbeing Wheel, developed by ARACY, illustrates how children's wellbeing depends on secure foundations across six domains: material basics, health, safety, learning, participation, and identity and culture. By placing the child at the centre, the Wheel provides an ecological model for understanding how food security underpins multiple aspects of wellbeing and aligns with the National Food Security Strategy's whole-of-system considerations. The Wheel is also a core part of ARACY's Common Approach training and is shared under Creative Commons licensing.

