

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria

Melbourne – Tuesday 20 August 2024

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WITNESSES

Zakaria Wahid, General Manager, and

Abdel-Rahman Radwan, Executive Assistant, Islamic Council of Victoria; and

Rebecca Eckard, Director, Policy and Research, Refugee Council of Australia.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria. Joining us for this session we have the Refugee Council of Australia and also the Islamic Council of Victoria.

Before I continue I just want to quickly introduce the panel to our committee. I am Trung Luu, Chair of the committee. To my left is Michael Galea. To my right are Aiv Puglielli, Dr Renee Heath and Mr Joe McCracken.

I just want to quickly read this information to you regarding the evidence you are providing us today. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. The transcript will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website. Just for recording purposes, could you please state your full name, your position and the organisation you are representing.

Rebecca ECKARD: Rebecca Eckard, Director of Policy and Research at the Refugee Council of Australia.

The CHAIR: Welcome, Rebecca.

Zakaria WAHID: Zakaria Wahid. I am the General Manager at the Islamic Council of Victoria.

The CHAIR: Good morning. It is a pleasure, Zakaria.

Abdel-Rahman RADWAN: Abdel-Rahman, Executive Assistant at the Islamic Council of Victoria.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. Thank you. I know we have already got your submissions, but we are open to you making an opening statement before the committee asks questions. Please, Rebecca, would you like to start?

Rebecca ECKARD: Thank you. Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to make a submission and to speak today, and thank you also for the inquiry into food security. Ensuring that all people in Victoria have access to sufficient and appropriate food is vital, and we are grateful for the scrutiny that this situation is receiving.

My name is Rebecca Eckard. I am the Director of Policy and Research at the Refugee Council of Australia. The refugee council is the national peak body for people from refugee, asylum-seeking and humanitarian backgrounds and the organisations and individuals who support them. Our submission focuses on the food insecurity that people from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds face. The thousands of people seeking refugee protection living in Victoria face many barriers to meeting their basic needs, including having sufficient food. People are waiting an average of 2½ years for an initial protection decision, over 3½ years for an administrative, merits-based appeal and over five years for a review by the Federal Court. This can mean 11 years of waiting for a decision.

There is a federal program that offers support for those that are unable to support themselves, but changes made in 2017 mean that very few people get access now while they wait years for a decision. Even when people can get help, they are purposely limited to a maximum 89 per cent of the JobSeeker rate, which is approximately \$48 per day now. The Victorian government has previously stepped in and provided some assistance in 2019,

and that has been ongoing, although it is done on a yearly basis so there is that kind of waiting to find out if it happens again. It is very welcome, but the majority of support for people comes from charities and community groups filling the ever-widening gap.

It is important to understand the context for people seeking protection and what they have experienced, particularly over the past few years. While many mainstream emergency relief providers saw a drop in presentations during the pandemic – because of the use of the Commonwealth’s JobSeeker and JobKeeper payments and the increases – people seeking refugee protection, including recognised refugees who are on temporary protection, were excluded from that support. Many people seeking asylum were the first to lose their jobs, and they were excluded from any kind of support. They were told to return home, without any recognition that they were seeking protection from those home countries. Even recognised refugees on temporary protection who owned their own businesses were excluded from JobKeeper. They had Australian citizen employees and they could get JobKeeper for those employees but not for themselves or any employees with temporary protection.

I mention this to the committee to contextualise that people seeking refugee protection have faced destitution and food scarcity for several years. They have been excluded from government support; their rental arrears accrued to tens of thousands of dollars per family; specialist asylum support agencies saw a dramatic increase in presentations, while their mainstream counterpart saw a decrease; and access to food was limited. It is important to recognise again that the Victorian government did step in in mid 2021 with the extreme hardship support program – this was to provide assistance to people who were excluded from Commonwealth programs. This assistance was lifesaving for people with no other forms of support.

The stories that the refugee council shared in our submission highlight what people seeking protection have faced for years: destitution, high risk of homelessness and food insecurity. There is the mum with three children who keeps her children home from school because she cannot bear to send them to school with empty lunch boxes, or the father who spent 6 to 8 hours each day on public transport going from one service to another to try to cobble together enough food pantry items and donations to feed his family. Sometimes, in place of actual food donations, he receives a \$60 supermarket voucher that is only available every two weeks. \$60 every fortnight does not go very far. He is desperate to work, but inconsistent and even punitive policy settings mean that he is waiting for his bridging visa to be renewed. These are people who are resilient, who arrived in Australia prepared to rebuild their lives, but Australia’s broken system has broken them.

I will finish with one more example. Our members have shared their experiences supporting families dealing with the devastating impact of malnutrition among children that have arrived from places like Sudan and Gaza. What may surprise you is that our members have been reporting malnutrition and the associated developmental delays among asylum-seeking children who have grown up in Australia. While the timeframe and circumstances of food scarcity that led to this malnutrition are not the same, the outcome is. Over many years children of asylum-seeking families living in Victoria have been without sufficient nutritious food, which has led to medically diagnosed malnutrition and its devastating effects. This inquiry is an excellent opportunity to hear from diverse voices and to implement recommendations to ensure all Victorians can experience food security.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Rebecca. Zakaria.

Zakaria WAHID: Thank you all for having us here. My name is Zakaria. I am the General Manager of the Islamic Council of Victoria. As I mentioned before, I am joined by Abdel-Rahman, one of our team members, and we do appreciate the committee investigating food insecurity and making it a priority. Very quickly, the ICV is the peak Islamic representative organisation of the state, so we represent over 270,000 Victorian Muslims comprising over a hundred different CALD, culturally and linguistically diverse, communities. As per our submission, obviously food insecurity is a key concern to the various organisations throughout the state, including the ICV, and it is really something that we have seen exacerbated post COVID due to the cost-of-living crisis. Just very quickly, ICV as an organisation is positioned on this topic, as we have been providing food relief to our community through food packages primarily during COVID-19 and post, which has been very highly reliant on government support and government funding, and we have been able to provide thousands of packages to different community members alongside other community organisations.

As per our submission, there have been a number of key observations the ICV has made, especially in recent times, in regard to the food insecurity crisis. Firstly, of course we all know economic challenges are the main cause of food insecurity in regard to the cost-of-living crisis and high inflation, which are both exacerbating food insecurity and also increasing nutritional poverty – that is, the ability for families that even have the money to afford food to afford nutritious food – and statistics show, such as from the Melbourne Institute *Foodbank Hunger Report*, that in 2020 food insecurity was at 13 per cent. It had risen to 36 per cent in 2023, and that is a year ago. Now it will be even further past that.

On top of that, both the Muslim community and multicultural communities are particularly vulnerable, as they are over-represented in lower socio-economic classes. This does include refugees, asylum seekers and international students. But it also is particularly high amongst working-class families today, so it is both these vulnerable communities but even the everyday mum and dad that are trying to feed their kids are now at serious risk of food insecurity. When it comes to household priorities, households will deprioritise food over other costs that they have to deal with that are growing today. I was visiting some of our regional partners in Ararat earlier this year, and they were mentioning to me that the local community there are prioritising paying for their house, paying the rent, over providing food. They are going to ensure that their kids are fed first, that they have got the house first, before the parents are feeding themselves. Obviously this is not the kind of situation we want to see families in, and it is really a growing issue amongst that general population of working-class families.

Additionally, when it comes to CALD communities specifically there is a need for culturally appropriate food aid. In the context of Muslim communities – of course halal food – and other multicultural communities there are going to be various different needs, and when it comes to the major food bank providers, most of them cannot provide culturally appropriately. They do not have any capacity to provide it at this time, because they are obviously so overloaded right now and they are struggling. They are turning away people, as they have reported themselves. On top of that there are various language barriers that CALD communities face, so even if there is food aid available, actually accessing that food aid is of course quite a difficulty for them and being able to actually navigate and locate that support. It is compounded by the fact that many multicultural families are larger just in nature. They have more kids, and that means there is a strain on resources and intensifies food insecurity for them.

In terms of recommendations, as we mentioned in the submission, in terms of government funding we are very happy to see that there have been new grants from the Victorian government, and it does mention culturally appropriate food. However, I think first and foremost it is about continued funding. We have had situations where we do have this kind of surge in funding but then it drops off. We had the PRMC priority response rounds during COVID; there were five rounds of that. Then since 2022 we have not really had any of those rounds, and we need this continued funding to make sure the community is actually supported. On top of that, it is really important how grants are being communicated to community. I have spoken to community groups that had just never even heard that there was a grant there, and then of course these groups will miss out. I think that reinforces the need for government to ensure that when these grants are given out there are a breadth of community groups that are supported amongst the multicultural community so that the Muslim community and other communities do not miss out, because if we are providing those grants but then some community groups have not even heard of them, they are not going to get that support. You do have these large constituencies that could miss out. A good example, very quickly, is Halal Food Bank, which is a not-for-profit here. It is the primary provider of halal food aid throughout Victoria. They have not received any federal or state funding since 2021. Their reserves are almost depleted, but they have much a higher demand now for food aid than ever before.

Lastly, of course we would also recommend more action to be taken by government in regard to supermarkets. Obviously, the supermarkets are making various arguments, but the reality is they are a duopoly. They do have some of the highest profit margins in the world, and these notions and the arguments they are making clearly do not add up to the reality of the situation on the ground. When we have a cost-of-living crisis, we have food insecurity being so high and yet supermarkets have the highest profits, something has to be done about that. I know that obviously relates a lot to the federal government, but I still think there is action that local government and the state government can take.

In closing, we really want to emphasise that access to food is a basic human right. It is not a luxury and it is not an extra expense, it is something that families and individuals should not have to forgo, and unfortunately right now they are having to forgo that. We must make sure that we protect all people from hunger, from food

insecurity and from malnutrition, and we really urge the government to take more action. It is great to see it is starting to take that action, but more action is required to address this critical issue. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for that. I will quickly start off. I just want to ask Rebecca – you are representing the Refugee Council of Australia, and you mentioned a number of refugees, asylum seekers and the like. Do you know the exact number, not in Australia but in Victoria itself, that we are talking about, just the cohort? You mentioned they are not getting access to support in relation to financial assistance from the government, so I just want to know what the actual number of that cohort is that is not getting anything at all.

Rebecca ECKARD: For that group, that is going to be people who are still in the process of seeking asylum or refugee protection. Unfortunately, the Department of Home Affairs does not publish or make available the statistics of the number of people seeking asylum by state and territory. We have been able to make some estimates based on the numbers that are published and the recognition that approximately between 35 and 40 per cent of people seeking asylum nationally tend to reside here in Victoria. We do believe that probably the total number of people may be upwards of 20,000, but the number of people that actually receive very little or no support at all would be much smaller than that. It would be in the several thousands, likely. There are many people who, while they receive no support, are able to support themselves. But there have been those that have been subject to some of the more punitive policy settings over the past decade or so, who would probably still be in the thousands here in Victoria, that have no access to support and may be excluded from even getting their visas renewed through no fault of their own.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Also, I will just turn to Zakaria. Sorry if I mispronounced your name.

Zakaria WAHID: That is fine.

The CHAIR: You mentioned the grants that the state government was providing during COVID and that have subsided since then. Was the actual drive from people, the demand, much higher during COVID, or is it still similar now to what it was during COVID?

Zakaria WAHID: I think that is a great question. Something I was trying to touch upon in my intro was that during COVID-19 obviously there were a lot of issues going on, but there was also a lot of government support. So people were experiencing it to an extent but not nearly to the extent that we have now, because the real cost-of-living issue has come post COVID. Obviously supermarkets as well have increased their prices dramatically post COVID. The issue is much more prevalent post COVID, but the problem as well is that it is compounded by the fact that there was a plethora of government funding during COVID but post COVID that funding obviously has declined. Now, obviously, the government did have to give support during that time more; that is understood. But when it comes to these most prevalent issues like food insecurity, we should not see that reduction post COVID – that it would reduce. So most definitely it was an issue during COVID, but it is much higher and much more exacerbated post it, compounded by the fact that obviously there is less funding. I think we can see that not just through the multicultural communities but all communities. The major food banks are the ones saying, ‘Our demand is higher than ever before.’

The CHAIR: Certainly that is what we are getting in the submission from Foodbank. Just from your observations, has the cost of living and the price hikes in relation to not just food but everything else like energy – COVID was 2019–20 – been the main driver of people demanding more now than they were before?

Zakaria WAHID: Demanding more support – is that your question?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Zakaria WAHID: Yes, most definitely. I mean, the fact is that various costs have gone up during this time. There are obviously food costs, but also the general costs, as I mentioned. The fact that not just lower-class families but middle-class families now have such short amounts of capital left in their bank accounts means that they are having to prioritise what to spend it on. So yes, most definitely there are these higher costs that have come during COVID, but especially post COVID, which are exacerbating that.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will hold my question and come back to it. Michael.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thanks, all, for joining us. I might start with you, Mr Wahid. Naturally there are certain different challenges in terms of being able to provide culturally appropriate food, and halal is a great example of that. I am curious from your experience, do you think the focus of support should be more heavily on providing the existing conventional food banks with those culturally appropriate options such as halal, or is it through more targeted support for things like Halal Food Bank – or a little bit of both?

Zakaria WAHID: Yes. I think that is a great question. I can answer it, but I might give my colleague a chance to answer, if that is okay.

Abdel-Rahman RADWAN: It is a very good question, and I think Zakaria did touch on it in terms of the capacity that food bank providers and wholesale have at the moment to look at culturally sensitive food options. It is just not a priority for them. They do not have the capacity to sort it out for themselves. As well, we have found that, not intentionally, there is quite a lot of nuance. At least we can speak from an Islamic perspective in terms of food regulations: it is not just halal meats and avoiding alcohol, but avoiding animal derivative emulsifiers and so on, which are very common in canned goods and so on that get distributed. We have found in our experience that people are coming to us after visiting food banks because they have not been able to find that. It is quite a predicament for them. Ultimately it is our view that a lot more work needs to be given to those CALD community organisations, particularly when it comes to language barriers and so on, to address those.

Michael GALEA: Of course. And specifically –

Rebecca ECKARD: Can I just add something that is very related as well. When we look at some of the refugee communities that have settled in Victoria, and I would say it would apply beyond Victoria, some of the expectation that you can go to a supermarket and purchase your fruit and vegetables was seen as a very negative thing. For instance, a number of the Karen refugees – these are people from Burma or Myanmar; they are an ethnic minority that was persecuted because of that and had been living on the Thailand–Burma border – had been used to, if not living in the camps themselves, outside of them, being able to go to the mountains and source their own vegetables. I think part of it is when we talk about sourcing culturally appropriate foods, it is also looking at solutions being designed by the people that are experiencing it and that are living through it. Many years ago, a number of the Karen women who had arrived in Melbourne said that they did not want to go to the supermarkets. They could not afford it on a very low income and they would much rather have their own gardens, so there was the creation of market gardens, which was an incredible success partnering with Parks Victoria. AMES was part of that program. They ended up creating the most incredible markets that were utilising the skills that they had, but also solving a problem they were experiencing. So I think there is a way to look at this. When you include people with lived experience of all the different facets of this, we actually can come up with solutions that would be mutually beneficial across the board.

Michael GALEA: That actually reminded me of a terrific group in my electorate. I am from the south-east of Melbourne, and we have Friends of Refugees. I am sure you have dealt with them in Springvale. You may even be aware of them too. They have their wonderful garden beds, their veggie patches – small scale, of course, but that is another way in which, whether it is small scale or large scale, you have these community-driven approaches. That is a really good point for us all to remember too, that it does not just have to be buying stuff from the shops or getting it from somewhere. Where there is that capacity and we can support the community to build that capacity, even better. So thank you, that is a really good point.

I might just go back to you – and I am sorry, I had a different name for you. What was your name, sorry?

Abdel-Rahman RADWAN: My name is Abdel-Rahman.

Michael GALEA: Oh, it is that, sorry. Apologies, it is correct. So Abdel-Rahman, can I just ask you then more about the other sorts of language barriers and other sorts of cultural barriers that we sitting here might not be immediately thinking of but that we should be conscious of, specifically with regard to Victoria's Muslim community?

Abdel-Rahman RADWAN: Of course. I will touch on it briefly and perhaps Zak can expand, but I think as well it is understanding the nature of people who are food-insecure. As we found, of course we deal with a lot of international students, refugees and even people regionally, but increasingly we have found a lot more people from the lower to even middle-class groups and families that are requiring care. Of course Muslim communities tend to have large families as well, so the idea of being able to get enough food for families so

people can provide – it can be a little bit disparaging for people to go to halal food banks with a small box of food that does not really go very far. So people's dignity is in mind as well. I am not sure, Zak, if you –

Zakaria WAHID: To your question on language barriers – sorry, that was the main point, yes?

Michael GALEA: Yes.

Zakaria WAHID: It is a tough one, because there are so many ethnic communities here, right? Take the Muslim community as one example, and there are many other multicultural communities – a hundred different ethnic communities, right? We have got people coming from the Middle East, from Africa, from Europe, from South-East Asia; it is very difficult to answer the question because there are so many different subgroups and subethnicities. Now, that becomes advantageous in the context of these kinds of situations – take Halal Food Bank, for example, ICV – because they are all coming under that broad spectrum of being Muslim and having halal food. Well, it is all the same relatively, for the most part, right? So you are able to at least provide to all of those different language barriers in groups, and part of that can actually be through these grants empowering those local communities, because they already have those people in place that can typically speak many of those languages. It is not just Arabic – obviously that is the main one – it is a lot more beyond that, right? And I think it goes both for the Muslim community but all multicultural communities that there are an incredible number of subsets in Victoria, incredibly diverse, and I could not really answer that question by telling you examples, because it would not do justice to the rest.

Michael GALEA: That is absolutely fair. We need to be looking at all possible scenarios and making sure we are getting across to as many people as we can. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Michael. Aiv.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for coming in and for your really detailed submissions. I might begin with the Islamic Council of Victoria representatives. There is some really excellent stuff in here. Reading through, we have got prevention rather than cure being the key, targeted policies being needed. As I think you noted earlier in your presentation, this includes legislation to outlaw and prevent supermarket price gouging, capping rental increases and ensuring that minimum wages and income support payments adequately reflect inflation and the rising cost of living. All of these sound excellent to me. In terms of the state government and its responsibilities and the things that it has within its power, do you think the state government should be doing everything that it can to be reining in these major supermarkets?

Zakaria WAHID: I will preface it by saying that obviously government support should not decrease in terms of food and security funding.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: No, no. Do not trade these things off, absolutely.

Zakaria WAHID: Of course it is not trading them off, but most definitely, yes, 100 per cent. Whatever can be done at all levels of government, it is absolutely vital that supermarkets are reined in. It has been obviously talked about so much – we are not the first people to come and talk about it – but it has to be noted that the reality is that the people on the ground are the ones suffering, whether it be multicultural communities, and that is huge element, all the way to your everyday Australian, right? Everyone is suffering, especially in the lower classes and the middle classes even, when it comes to the cost of goods in the supermarkets. Like I said before – and we all know this – the profit margins are some of the highest, if not the highest, in the world. When you have got that coupled with a cost-of-living crisis, there is not really any argument if you can make, and even if you break down some of the arguments that have been made, such as the Coles CEO having made arguments such as the fact that they have longer distances they have to travel and their costs are higher because of that – that does not make any sense, right? Their margin should be lower then, not higher, right? There are various arguments that have been made by the supermarkets, but in reality, unfortunately, it would appear to us as multicultural communities that it is about protecting their brand position and their profit margins as opposed to trying to figure out how they can actually support Australians, especially given the fact that we have a duopoly, which is quite unique when we look at other Western democracies which do not necessarily have a duopoly around the world. So most definitely there is a need to rein these supermarkets in.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: And as you have indicated, the need for government to step into this space because the companies are not doing it themselves.

Zakaria WAHID: Yes. Self-regulation a lot of time does not work, does not make sense, and I think it is vital that, given the suffering that is going on in the community, we do not rely on corporations to determine self-regulation. The government needs to actually take that direct action.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Awesome points. Just moving to you, Rebecca, looking at your submission, we have got the first recommendation: 'Equitable access and utilisation of nutritious food should be a basic right for all Victorians, including refugee communities and people seeking asylum'. Should the state government declare food an essential service?

Rebecca ECKARD: It is probably beyond the scope of my expertise. But I think, as we have said, it is a basic need, so for it to follow that it is a basic right – I think there is a logic there. I think, from what my colleagues have said as well, with the impact on refugees and asylum-seeking individuals and families, food insecurity has been an experience because of all of the other pressures. Victoria is unique in that we do have our charter of human rights in a way that we do not have federally, so there may be some unique ways in which we could ensure that that basic need is actually enshrined in some way.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: This came up earlier today, actually, the idea of access to food being enshrined in legislation as a human right for Victorians. Is that something that, collectively as a panel, you would support?

Rebecca ECKARD: I guess my question would be: how would you seek a remedy if you were not able to experience that right? What would be the impact if it would mean that considerations have to be given when there are state government decisions in relation to the flow-on effects and how it could affect Victorians' ability to access nutritious food? Those kinds of things should be considered. But again, it is probably a little bit outside of the scope of what the refugee council's expertise would be.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, no worries at all. How about for the Islamic Council of Victoria?

Zakaria WAHID: So your question, sorry, just to clarify is: is food a basic human right? Was that it?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, and whether it should be enshrined in legislation that that is a right.

Zakaria WAHID: Right, yes. We would definitely say that it is most definitely a basic human right. I think we would say that there should be some legislation around this. Given the fact that we are such a developed nation, one of the strongest economies in the world, and the fact that your everyday mum and dad are struggling with food insecurity, if it takes legislation, then yes, we would.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Heath.

Renee HEATH: Thank you so much. Thanks for coming in and for your submission and your presentation. I love that you said 'Solutions designed by people living through it'. The question I have for both groups is: what does the community need to be self-sustaining?

Rebecca ECKARD: Ideally, we would be asking the communities themselves and the individuals and groups. I think part of this is of course this inquiry being able to scrutinise it, but being able to have more people with lived experience of food insecurity and, again, some of the other very related issues that are causing the food insecurity would have to be investigated more to be able to provide feedback in an appropriate and safe way. We recognise that there are opportunities and limitations to what each level of government can do. I think that the limitations have been often spoken about but the opportunities have not been fully explored. So I think it would be about going to those communities – and again, as was stated, this funding that has been made available is really welcome, but if some of the key groups that are actually providing this have not been made aware of it, that is a great idea that has not actually been transmitted. It is more than an idea, it is actually resources, but how is that being communicated, especially among multicultural communities? I understand Victoria has such an extraordinarily diverse multicultural population, so it is not about trying to communicate with every single one, but there are definitely ways that you can communicate with key groups, with community leaders and representatives. I think a lot has been learned, again through the COVID experience, about the need to communicate with those communities. So, again, it is thinking through that communication

about what is currently available but then thinking through some of the solutions as well and having better ways of engaging with community.

Zakaria WAHID: Yes. Just to clarify, your question is how we make the communities more self-sustaining, right?

Renee HEATH: Yes.

Zakaria WAHID: I think it comes down to a lot of the recommendations – the refugee council is mentioned as well as the ICV. I think we know we are in a unique period right now where food insecurity is a much greater issue than we can remember before. In terms of making them self-sustaining, the way I think of it is: how do we get it back to how it was before? How do we get to that point, if not better, where actually the communities do not have this huge issue? I do not think we will ever fully solve food insecurity, but the idea is that we have it kept down as a minimal kind of issue. I think firstly in terms of the government funding, it is not that forever you are going to have massive government funding and that is just how we will solve it; it is more about getting these people who are in vulnerable positions through these difficult times while action is taken to fix the economic conditions that we are in, coupled with reining in the supermarkets and their pricing and the gouging that we have going on.

It is about ensuring that these communities are not left behind and that they are actually supported in these very difficult times. We have high interest rates, and we have got to make sure that while those interest rates are high enough support is given to those who are most vulnerable and are going to be most hurt by the difficult times that they are in so that they can actually make it through them. And then that way we can start creating more self-sustaining communities, because if the communities break down under pressure – let us take, for example, these not-for-profit organisations that are almost out of funding – you have lost that capability to self-sustain; you have lost that ability to provide the ongoing support. So I think it is working towards that self-sustainability, but it is going to take time; it is going to take that support from the government. Like I said, it is great that we are seeing grants, but I think it is about getting it to the right people – is it being communicated; is it being spread enough – while working towards making it more sustainable?

Renee HEATH: Just to clarify something there: so you see the community sustainability as relying on those groups?

Zakaria WAHID: You mean the not-for-profit organisations?

Renee HEATH: Yes.

Zakaria WAHID: I think at the current time I would say so.

Renee HEATH: But we want to get them off that cycle of dependence.

Zakaria WAHID: Of course.

Renee HEATH: So I guess that is what I am asking: what tools are needed to do that? You have spoken a lot about dignity, and one of the presenters spoke about the human right to food is to be able to buy your own food or grow your own food. So what is it that can bring the community to a place where they are secure in themselves?

Zakaria WAHID: I think it is these bigger ticket items. I will let you jump in as well, but I think effectively it is some of the bigger ticket items. Like we said – the costs at the supermarket actually have to be reasonable. But I think it is broader when we talk about general self-sustainability to be able to get away from this, right? What we are talking about right now is how we solve the current food insecurity crisis, but to actually get that self-sustainability we are talking about uplifting the lower classes enough so that they are able to support themselves. But that is obviously a lot more of a nuanced answer.

Renee HEATH: Yes, and that is what I want to know, though.

Zakaria WAHID: Do you want to jump in?

Abdel-Rahman RADWAN: I was just going to double down on this idea of having an innovative, sustainable solution. It is not really a possibility with the volume that we are experiencing at the moment. It is very hard for us to be able to try and transition to communal gardens and so on without us firstly reducing the volume, but particularly the demographic. I field calls at the Islamic Council of Victoria and am seeing people who have never asked for food assistance before coming to that. That is what needs to be stopped before we can think of a sustainable long term, which ultimately exists with –

Zakaria WAHID: It is not that we do not want to work towards self-sustainability. We want to work towards self-sustainability, but I think it goes beyond a solution to food insecurity to create that self-sustainability, which relates to all kinds of communities, including the multicultural communities' various different efforts, which I do not think I could probably put in just a few words. But I think the simple way of answering is that it would be action taken beyond food insecurity, and that is actually helping uplift those communities in various different ways.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Joe, would you like to contribute?

Joe McCracken: Yes, thank you. I have been listening intently, and I really appreciate the discussion. I have got a few different points. I know you guys from the Islamic Council mentioned Ararat. Ararat is in my electorate, and I know it very, very well. And you talked about people in the Islamic community there focusing on housing and paying housing costs, whether it is paying a mortgage or paying rent. One of the big costs of housing is energy, whether it is gas or electricity. Do you think the Victorian government should be doing everything it can to reduce energy costs so that those people who are paying high energy bills can then spend it on food?

Zakaria WAHID: Yes, sure. Just to clarify with my examples, they even relate to the general Australian population as well – what I was speaking to and mentioning. So everyone is doing it tough, including in Ararat. As I said before, when it comes to the food insecurity crisis, there are numerous families that are having to prioritise in a household – ‘What do we pay for?’ So when it comes to the most basic necessities, they are having to pick which one they are actually going to fund.

Joe McCracken: So are you saying that energy bills or those sorts of bills are a higher priority than food?

Zakaria WAHID: Yes, that is what I am getting to. For some families, and this is anecdotal, in this case I would definitely imagine that one of the costs they are having to pay for is electricity. You cannot go without it, right? Definitely it is obviously not the main thing when talking about food insecurity, but all kind of costs of living have to be reined in. And yes, on top of supermarkets we have obviously seen skyrocketing electricity costs, which are impacting lower class communities much more than anyone else. There is obviously a lot of reporting as well right now about how those costs are going up, that families are not actually aware when those costs go up. So definitely, to your question, I would say the community needs much more support when it comes to these costs, rising electricity costs, but also I think it is worth noting some of the relief that has come – not necessarily from the Victorian government – such as the \$250 injection of cash to families. These are great solutions but they are not fixing the problem, which is that the costs are higher, right?

Renee HEATH: Yes. Band-aids.

Zakaria WAHID: It is just a bandaid solution, which is costing the taxpayer at the end of the day more money. Really, it is about reining in electricity.

Joe McCracken: Yes, I agree. You are talking my language, man. Trust me.

Zakaria WAHID: This is coming of course, as we all know, from a country which has a huge output of electricity in terms of creation and exportation of it.

Joe McCracken: So it would be fair to say that anything the Victorian government can do to make sure electricity is cheaper is a good thing.

Zakaria WAHID: In general, I would say so, yes.

Joe McCracken: What about in terms of the cost of housing? I know these might seem like indirect things, but these are all costs that people incur, and then as a result food insecurity exists because of these other things that cost. So would you say the same thing about housing, that the Victorian government needs to pull every lever it can to make sure housing costs less so that food can then be a priority?

Zakaria Wahid: Firstly, yes, you could actually say it is a direct result, because if a family is looking at 'I've got five things I've got to pay for and the house is one of them, so I'm not going to go with the food,' it is direct, right? In terms of doing everything we can, I would say, yes, most things need to be done, most definitely.

Joe McCracken: So you are saying there is a direct link between housing and food insecurity.

Zakaria Wahid: It depends on the context, I think. But when rental costs are going up and when housing prices are going up, obviously it is quite an issue. I do not really want to go into the topic of, I guess, interest rates, and that is how it can kind of jump in. Obviously we need the economy to be fixed. But most definitely, support is needed in this area in the context of high rents, high rent increases that have occurred, and the fact that families have to choose between food and housing. That is a crisis.

Joe McCracken: It is an awful position for someone to be in. I mean, you would not wish that on your worst enemy.

Zakaria Wahid: Exactly.

Joe McCracken: The other question I had, and I want to go to the refugee council on this one, is about the visa terms and conditions that a lot of people may be here on. We heard evidence earlier, given this morning, that sometimes people, perhaps they are international students, can only work a certain amount of hours per week to provide for themselves. Would you be advocating for changing those conditions so that if people did want to work more that they would have the option to do so?

Rebecca Eckard: International students would be a visa type that is outside of the scope of what the refugee council would look at, so I would be happy to defer in that regard. But I think that the conditions and the limitations on the condition to work – and as I mentioned before, the actual renewal of the temporary visas, the bridging visas that most people seeking asylum or seeking refugee protection remain on – are definitely a major issue. We have so many examples of people who want to work, that have skills. They have employers that are ringing up saying, 'Have you been able to get that visa renewed?' And there are issues within the current visa system that are limiting the ability of people to get those visas renewed with their work rights attached to it.

Joe McCracken: And the dignity of work that provides someone's self-worth, the ability to contribute.

Rebecca Eckard: Dignity of work, and the loss to the Australian community, because a number of people have for many years been contributing in really big ways, and to not be able to do that, again, through no fault of their own – we are talking about people who are not trying to avoid these visa renewals. They are in fact applying before they expire, so they are doing everything from their point of view. But there are issues within the current system that actually prevent them from having a renewed visa, and it really has a great impact. And again, when we are talking about some of the people that need support, many of those people could actually be supporting themselves if they had a renewed visa with work rights attached to it, and it would allow them to be able to support themselves. And then there are others who do need the support, that need that safety net, that currently do not have it. I think it is a major issue that, again, sits outside of necessarily the state government's ability but not their ability to discuss with their Commonwealth counterparts, because it has an impact on the services delivered by the state.

Joe McCracken: Yes. Do you gentleman have any –

Abdel-Rahman Radwan: Yes. With international students, it is definitely a community that we closely work with at the Islamic Council of Victoria, and we have seen the submissions from the graduate student association at UniMelb as well. I think with those limits, what it means is that the limited income that they have – obviously we have spoken before about housing and so on – creates more of the demand on food bank services, so they do not actually spend money, of the actually limited dollar amount that they have, on food –

they will alternatively be looking at food bank services. Universities have tried to fill the gap, but it is not really an appropriate –

Joe McCracken: It is not the right fix.

Abdel-Rahman RADWAN: Yes.

Joe McCracken: Yes. I agree with you. I think my time is up, I am sorry, but you finish your answer.

Zakaria WAHID: Just very quickly, I will just add to that by saying that especially where we have given out food relief, a large percentage of the people requesting support are international students. I probably will not comment on things like the caps or the hours they are working. But I think as a country, obviously, international students make up a good portion of our economy, so we want to make sure that we are still attracting them here and that they are supported when they come here. In Ramadan we have a daily iftar, where we give food out when people are fasting, and the vast majority coming through are international students. It is not just that they are coming because it is community, it is probably because they do not actually have money for food.

Joe McCracken: Yes. Thanks very much, I really appreciate your honesty.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. Our time has gone quickly. Again, thank you, Refugee Council of Australia and Islamic Council of Victoria, for coming in and giving your submission and evidence today. We will definitely looking at that and take it into consideration when we make recommendations down the track, so thanks for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.