

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria

Melbourne – Tuesday 20 August 2024

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WITNESS

Abe Ropitini, Executive Director, Population Health, Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria. For our last session we have Abe from the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, welcome.

Before I continue, I will just quickly read this information to you regarding the evidence that you are providing to us today. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provision 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 thing, 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 with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. The transcript will ultimately be made public and be posted on the committee website.

For recording purposes, can you please state your full name, your position and the organisation you are with.

Abe ROPITINI: Sure, my name is Abe Ropitini. I am the Executive Director of Population Health at the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, more commonly know as VACCHO.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I want to quickly introduce you to the committee: Trung Luu, the Chair; Michael Galea; Aiv Puglielli; and Dr Renee Heath. Welcome. We have your submission, but I will open it up for you to make an opening statement before we have any questions for you.

Abe ROPITINI: Thank you very much. It is great to be here, and I would like to begin by acknowledging that we are all meeting on Aboriginal land. I would like to pay my respects to elders past and present and to emerging leaders of this country. I acknowledge the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung mob in particular and any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that are here with us in the room or that are dialling in online and watching the proceedings.

I can first start by just telling you a little bit about VACCHO. VACCHO is the peak body for Aboriginal health and wellbeing in the state of Victoria. Every jurisdiction across the country has a peak body that represents the health and wellbeing interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We are all state-based affiliates of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, and collectively we represent over 150 community controlled health services across the country. In Victoria we have 33, all of whom are controlled and governed by their local communities. It is a 50-year history of providing comprehensive, culturally safe health and wellbeing services for Aboriginal communities.

My role at VACCHO is I am the Executive Director of Population Health. I have to say I am a Māori, so I am one of the neighbours. My country, where I am from, is on the east coast of the North Island of Aotearoa. I have lived my adult life over here, and actually on this side of the Tasman I am descended from Palawa mob as well, so the top north-eastern corner of Tasmania where the Truyilina people are from. My ancestry on this side of the Tasman links into there. I do have to say my community and cultural connections are primarily back home, so that is how I mainly identify.

In providing our statement today I want to acknowledge the leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders and advocates that have been putting forward the position and the stance of Aboriginal communities in relation to important inquiries related to food security, poverty and hardship for many years. Much of what I am going to be sharing today is actually not from anybody who has produced this work within the last two weeks, it is the product of heavy and strong activism for many, many years.

We really welcome the opportunity to contribute to your Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria, and I want to commend the terms of reference for being comprehensive and also inviting a range of perspectives outside of some of the more logistic and transport-related considerations that feed into food security which we have seen in other inquiries. I think that the terms of reference provide you with the right lens through which to consider

the challenges in relation to food security in Victoria. We have outlined our key recommendations and points in our written submission, and I am sure we can have some discussions about that shortly.

But first, if I may, I would like to say a few things to place this inquiry within an historical context. Food security in Aboriginal communities is not new; it is in fact a story of food insecurity, and it is a story of poverty and hardship that commenced when the colonisation of these lands commenced several hundred years ago now. Throughout the initial period of colonisation in the south-eastern part of this country it was the deliberate policy to keep Aboriginal communities food-insecure for a long time. The Yoorrook truth and justice commission has documented these policies extensively, but I just want to briefly outline some of them here today. The early stages of colonisation in Australia started with the rounding up of Aboriginal people and placing them on missions and continued through that period with the banning and punishing of people from transferring knowledge intergenerationally and from sharing knowledge in particular around food and sharing of food and the celebration of culture and the practising of ritual with food.

Eventually those missions were closed. But the mass removal of children was accelerated, and the policies of removal resulted in significant dispossession of knowledge, even further. Many of those children, as we know, were abused in the care of the state, and as a result of that we are now dealing with immense intergenerational trauma, which has a long tail and still provides us with significant challenges that we have to overcome today. There was throughout that entire period – and it still continues today – an immense amount of wealth, food knowledge and economic independence that was lost within the First Nations of this country. That is what has led us today to a set of recommendations that we are putting forward – an historical context of food insecurity and dispossession that was deliberate and that has led to a certain set of unique circumstances that require unique solutions. Those solutions need to be Aboriginal-led.

If I can just illustrate how much has been lost, we have in the western part of the state an incredible asset, which is Budj Bim. It is one of the most ancient complex aquaculture systems that we have, and a few years ago it was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site and was placed into the care of traditional owners on Gunditjmarra country. They have been restoring the health of the aquaculture system there, and they have been bringing it back to life. For thousands of years Gunditjmarra mob were cultivating the eels that would flow through Budj Bim, and it was part of a complex community food system which fed that mob and which was part of how country would provide wealth, economic independence and wellbeing to all people who lived there.

In a very short period of time after contact and colonisation began we transitioned to the mission period, and what we saw in a dramatic shift for Aboriginal communities was obviously missions. In 2002 the University of Melbourne published a book called *Letters from Aboriginal Women*, and it was a recording of all of the letters that were placed into the possession of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, who were the administrators of the mission system. There were letters from women all across the state that were sent to mission managers that were asking for permits to travel or for additional rations or for clothing, and it tells a sad story about the reality of that loss, from the previous precolonial period, of the wealth that we saw in places like Budj Bim.

I just want to read one of those letters to you. This is a letter from a woman called Lizzie, who was placed near Colac with her husband and their children, and at that time she was considered a half-caste – language that we do not use anymore. In July 1905 she wrote to a fellow called Friedrich Hagenauer, who was the secretary of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines. She wrote:

Dear Sir

... I am now writing to once more to grant me a little help for the winter[;] we are nearly starved[.] Mr Hagenauer we are so much in debt that we cannot buy enough food[.] I have been fined for my children not attending school & the reason is they never had enough food to be kept going[;] ... we cannot afford to buy food & clothing this winter[;] the ones going to school now is nearly barefooted & thin clothes on them[;] ... the board placed us here in the beginning & gave us no start of any kind[;] ... if they would have started us with a little help for couple of years we may have done better such as given us seed or a plough to start the ground with we may have been in pocket[;] ... if they wont grant the clothes I hope they will the rations but I greatly need bothe for the winter is very bleak & cold here at present[.] ... Mr Hagenauer I never ask the board only when I see I am completely in a starving position[;]

She did not receive a reply, or at least there is no record of one. But three months later she wrote again and said about her husband:

... Joe has gone back to the hospital again[;] he was home for a while but made no progress & the doctor said he was to go back ... dear Mr Hagenauer I feel it very hard to be as I am & my husband sick[.] I hope the board will allow me the provisions & a little meat till he is able to earn[;]

This letter was referred to a Mr Ditchburn, who responded that it was not the practice of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines to provide meat to half-caste people. That is what we are dealing with today, the long tail and the trauma which has been transferred intergenerationally over the years, until in the 1970s we saw the establishment of the first Aboriginal community controlled health organisations not far from here in Fitzroy.

After the missions were closed down and Aboriginal people started making their way to Melbourne, finding community, reconnecting and retracing where they had originally come from, the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service was set up near Charcoal Lane to facilitate that reconnection and to help people to find where they had originally come from. Since that time we have been expanding the response that we have been resourcing to provide not just health services but also a full range of wraparound social services that address the health concerns of Aboriginal communities but also the social determinants of health and to respond to the historical determinants of health and the political determinants that I was just describing in reading those letters. What we have learned in that now 50-year history is that the key driver of food security is, 100 per cent, poverty, and this is reflected in written submissions that have been made by VACCHO but also VCOSS, the peak body for the community sector in Victoria. Over the 50 years of delivering these services we have also learned that the nature of poverty is that it is entrenched in Victoria by the massive loss of knowledge and the dismantling of established societal structures within Aboriginal communities in a very organised and deliberate way.

Culture, food and health we also know are inseparable. When we talk about food security and whether you have got enough food, we are also talking about whether you are connected to a celebration of your culture, and we know this because you only need to walk not far from here down Lygon Street to see that all of the food offerings that we have in this incredible city of ours are inseparable from the cultural dynamics of the city also. To separate food from a people is also to separate their culture, and what we saw through the deliberate removal of culture is the removal of food practices and food connection as well. It is a pretty appalling thing to imagine ever removing the ability for a culture to have its food. If you think about going to friends that you may have who are from the Italian community or the Greek community, you will always see that food is an expression of their culture, and it would be an appalling crime to ever set about the deliberate removal of that from them. You also imagine that if that was to happen, it would affect them for generations to come with grief and with resistance. It is not a nice thing to contemplate but it is exactly what happened here, and it is this historical perspective that I would like to share with you.

Because it did happen here, Aboriginal communities have unique challenges, and they require unique solutions. Our written submission puts forward that we really insist that government provides – and perhaps you can do this through your report back to the Parliament – support and commitment for Aboriginal-led and Aboriginal self-determined responses to be able to provide an increase in the capacity of food security support that we deliver across our communities at the moment. There is not an Aboriginal community controlled organisation in the state that you can go to at the moment that does not have a food program. It is embedded within what we do, and it is unique in the way that we deliver it; it is not a standalone thing that we provide.

Although the organisations that have provided evidence to you today do exceptional work, often food relief is provided through community organisations that Aboriginal people do not go to or do not feel comfortable going to, whereas with community-controlled organisations it is part and parcel of what we do. When people come in to get their food packages, in particular increasingly recently with the inflation crisis and cost of living, we will have conversations with them about their health at the same time. We will embed that into homework clubs that kids come to; we will embed it into elders groups. We will provide that food alongside checking whether people have had their flu shots or immunisations across the whole range of immunisations that people need, and we will also check to see if people have had a health check and if they need to go and see the doctor. So that is part of the wraparound suite of supports that we provide within our sector which we are very proud, but we need sustained support from government to be able to recognise that we are one of the largest providers of food assistance to communities within the state and that we want to grow that and increase the capacity and the ability for it to also be encompassing food gardens, food sovereignty initiatives and a whole range of things which we have opportunities to establish through Aboriginal-led, self-determined approaches.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you for that. There are a few recommendations. I will quickly go to one. Recommendation 2: establish and maintain on-country community gardens. Could you expand that in relation to, you said, that scale: what do you envision in relation to that scale, and what sort of growth in terms of food that you are actually growing for the Indigenous community?

Abe ROPITINI: For sure. Aboriginal community gardens are an important policy response to food insecurity in communities. We have a couple at the moment, and they are extraordinarily productive and successful in not only providing nutritious and healthy food to local communities but also providing a place for knowledge transfer and knowledge generation. A little bit of what I was talking about before around the history of this country and the knowledge that was lost around food and the complex food systems that used to exist and the need to revive them, that needs to happen through Aboriginal-led initiatives like community gardens, similar to revival of the aquaculture system at Budj Bim.

I will give you the example of the one that is probably the most successful recently in East Gippsland, in Orbost, at an ACCHO called the Muuji Aboriginal council. After the bushfires raced through Gippsland in 2019–20 over the Black Summer, there was bushfire recovery that provided funding to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations in Gippsland and East Gippsland, and the Muuji Aboriginal council decided that they wanted to use that funding for an initiative that was going to engage the community and bring the community into a place where they would be able to share knowledge and be able to have yarns with their community around resilience and preparedness for the next natural disaster. They had a property and they wanted to turn it into a place where you could do on-country food education for young people or you could bring elders in to share knowledge around what used to grow in that part of the country, and to actually crop them and to grow them into what is now quite a productive plant nursery, which is not only being treasured by that local community but is also bringing in non-Aboriginal people who are very interested in understanding permaculture principles that are being applied there. And it is fairly productive in also providing fruits and vegetables and vegetables that have not been seen in many decades as well. So that is the kind of initiative we want support for.

We also want support for kitchen gardens as well, and we have a number of ACCHOs that have early learning centres, early childhood education centres, so the ability to be able to integrate those services with food education, through actually growing food and teaching young ones that country is where nutrition traditionally has come from and to equip them with the desire to be able to eat what their ancestors ate, which is not just a health aspiration for us but is also a cultural aspiration, which is really owed to the First Peoples of this country as well.

The CHAIR: So it is a mixture of both traditional food and modern-day crops as well.

Abe ROPITINI: Yes, that is right. You get your stock standard fruits, vegetables and then also –

The CHAIR: You mentioned traditional food and bringing the knowledge of what First Nations people used to harvest and eat. I just want to get a picture or an idea of what the visitor garden is. Also, it is mentioned in this recommendation:

... traditional food growing and food-related cultural practices.

Is that to pass on to the next generation or to pass on to the wider population in relation to how First Nations people used to process their food and harvest their food? Is that taught to the rest of the community?

Abe ROPITINI: That is right. It is a knowledge-revival process. If you look at East Gippsland, community elders are coming in to plant sweet yams that used to be grown there in abundance, and it is a real pleasure to see that they are returning now and that those practices are being embedded. If you look at the west of the state with Budj Bim and the amount of incredible knowledge that is being revived around how the eels run in Lake Condah, it is incredible. I think they have developed an amazing on-country aquaculture system and also a place which is going to be a tourism hub, which is also sharing that knowledge and celebrating the fact that it is a UNESCO World Heritage site that we should all be very proud of. Why can't it also be an Aboriginal-led food security initiative as well in respect of the restoration of that past legacy of pride in the eels that run in that part of the state?

The CHAIR: Thank you. Michael.

Michael GALEA: Thank you very much, Mr Ropitini, for joining us, or should I say kia-ora?

Abe ROPITINI: Kia-ora.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. That was a very moving and haunting illustration of just where we still are from where we have come from. I think that is a really timely reminder that we are here looking at the challenges now, but we have to be mindful of the 250 years before us and that there is a lot of work still to be done. We have spoken about Budj Bim but also Moogji, and I was actually going to ask you about that with the community garden. It sounds quite promising. My first question is: have we lost a lot of these skills and a lot of these practices or are there still a lot of these cultural ways – these traditional ways of fishing, hunting, gathering food – that we can still bring back and learn from?

Abe ROPITINI: The knowledge is definitely still there, but the urgency of the need for its revival has never been more pressing. We have an incredible success through community-controlled services in that elders are now living longer and they are around longer to be able to share that knowledge that they have and to be able to pass it on – a knowledge which we need to treasure and we need to transition into initiatives like the community garden at Moogji, like at Tae Rak, and at Budj Bim the aquaculture system that is being revived there. It is around providing the support for the right leadership for that knowledge to come out, because that knowledge is not going to be shared with just anyone. As we know through the establishment of the treaty process, there need to be local traditional owners that are sovereign in terms of the use of that local knowledge and the sharing of it as well. I think it is definitely there, but we need the overall commitment for it to be stewarded in the right way so that it can be put to use within the conversation that we are having today around food security.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I was quite interested when you mentioned – which is basically also quite obvious – the correlation between food and culture. To what degree, when you see programs such as Moogji or the other ones you have just mentioned, do you see an improvement in broader wellbeing in terms of mental health wellbeing and a sense of empowerment of the community as well? What do you see from projects like this?

Abe ROPITINI: One hundred per cent, we do. We have evaluated this, and we have evaluated not just the relationship between food, culture and health and wellbeing but actually culture, kinship, affirmations of identity and outcomes in health and wellbeing for Aboriginal people. There is an absolute link. By strengthening and expanding the number of opportunities for people to connect with each other, with their communities, with their families and with kinship networks through food, there is an extraordinarily powerful set of opportunities that we have to heal intergenerational trauma. So within the outlook that your inquiry has on mental health, food as a tool to bring people together, to share knowledge, to create environments and an atmosphere of togetherness and cultural safety, all of that is part of what Aboriginal community controlled health organisations are delivering every day. It is not well recognised. It is not well supported by government funders, with respect. I know that local members come out and visit their local Aboriginal community controlled organisations, and you understand it because you see it, but the machinery of government does not recognise it and does not fund it as a strength – the relationship between the food that we provide to communities and within communities, the programs that we run to engage communities in particular with that food, and then also the health outcomes that we receive from the overall experiences of cultural safety when you blend those things together.

Michael GALEA: You will no doubt be unsurprised to hear me say exactly that with regard to my local provider, the DDACL, and would also be of course aware of the challenges facing that particular ACCHO at the moment. But I guess that point and my next question was in terms of those providers: from what I have seen and from what I have heard from some colleagues and from others in the community, there is definitely a sense of safety and comfort in going to an Aboriginal-run service as opposed to something else. I think I know what the answer is, but would that apply to food as well?

Abe ROPITINI: Yes, 100 per cent. When the floods hit Northern Victoria in late 2022, the response from government in rushing out food relief funding was to run it through mainstream organisations that delivered no benefits for Aboriginal communities. In a few areas there were reasonably good partnerships in place, but it was an acute example of where the support was rushed out into the wrong place. It did not reach Aboriginal communities in a lot of places, in particular Shepparton and in particular Echuca, areas that were really in need so –

Michael GALEA: Both of which have quite high Aboriginal populations too.

Abe ROPITINI: That is right.

Michael GALEA: Again, from an earlier conversation today, we do not want to see a repeat, but we have to be prepared. So for a future situation such as that, had Rumbalara or Njernda been involved a little bit more, that would have led to some better outcomes?

Abe ROPITINI: Yes, 100 per cent. And it is not that we do not provide that without the funding – we do. We self-fund that. We do what needs to be done, but it does help when there is recognition from government around the most appropriate avenue through which the funding and support should be delivered. So in those examples Njernda and Rumbalara should have been the first to receive that support.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Michael. Aiv.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Thanks, Abe, for speaking to us today. Just touching on what you mentioned earlier, the sharing of permaculture principles and that knowledge being passed down between generations, with respect to communities that you work with right across the state, do you think there is still concern with some about the practices that are still in use in other parts of agriculture in the way that land is used and extracted, particularly operations that then feed into the major supermarket chains? Do you think there are still concerns in different parts of First Nations communities in that culture of extraction – maximising yield, maximising profit, rather than caring for country?

Abe ROPITINI: Are you in the Greens?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Maybe. Just maybe.

Abe ROPITINI: That makes sense. The answer is yes: there is concern about that, and that concern manifests in a couple of different ways. One is the damage to country that is caused through extractive approaches and treating country as property and a set of resources that can be plundered, basically. Unsustainable approaches to land management: we see this from our traditional owner groups in the advocacy that they are providing, and we will see it come out through the process of negotiating a treaty in this state – that the relationship that First Peoples have with this country provides an obligation through a treaty relationship and partnership for everybody who lives here to care for their country. And who better to provide that obligation to us than the original owners of this land? So yes, there is concern about that.

To the point around what happens after that extraction and it leads into the supply chains, major supermarkets and others – there is also a significant concern about commercial conduct and the commercial determinants of health and wellbeing, which I know you have heard a little bit about in other submissions or earlier today. But I just want to refine the point that that has a specific set of concerns for what it does within Aboriginal communities. Whether it is the conduct of supermarket chains in the locations at which they want to open liquor stores or whether it is the conduct of marketing and the predatory targeting of multimedia messages to people who we know are facing significant stress, increasing the likelihood that they will opt for more convenient, cheaper but less healthy food options is a major concern with our Aboriginal communities. It is a concern that we hear all the time from our Aboriginal health practitioners, from the nurses that we work with in our chronic disease integrated care management programs, and it is a considerable concern that is always raised by the leadership of our Aboriginal community controlled sector as well.

In our submission we note community-based, Aboriginal-led research that we were closely partnered with Deakin University in undertaking across the state. Six Aboriginal communities across Victoria participated in workshops with us to map out their community food systems and to share with us all of the influences that lead to decision-making, all of the constraints around access, cost, all of the factors that are often interrelated. It was very powerful that there was concern coming through in every single one of those workshops around the conduct of corporates. The report is called the *FoodPATH Community Report*. We have published it, and I can share it with the committee as well. There are a set of recommendations in there as well which I think government needs to take seriously, both at the state and at the Commonwealth level.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Just back to some of the predatory marketing practices that you spoke about being employed by some of the major supermarkets: could you speak a bit more about those and what effect they are having?

Abe ROPITINI: I have to say at the moment they are not well understood, but there is research which is commencing at the moment, which the community controlled sector is partnered in to understand it better. Social media is a huge concern in terms of predatory marketing, as a channel which is not well regulated and which is unbridled in how it can reach into people's homes in ways that are really quite invasive and which parents do not have the ability to monitor in the same way as you can monitor what your kids are watching on TV.

With the monetisation of influencing and through the use of algorithms and other forms of being able to influence what people are thinking and then saying, ultimately what that leads to is: when you are a parent and you are strapped for cash and you are in the supermarket and your kids are telling you what they want and you are having to make a decision about (a) whether to buy healthy, nutritious fruits and vegetables and whether your kids are going to eat it – right? – or whether that is going to be wasted money versus (b) buying hot chips that you can just whack in the oven, put salt on, maybe some tomato sauce, maybe some gravy, you know that they will eat that because they have been conditioned to want it, versus what is an engineered aversion to healthier options and in fact less access to healthier options as well – because these things are not getting cheaper, they are becoming significantly more expensive. There are a set of considerations at the till for that parent which put us on a trajectory towards increased chronic disease, towards further entrenchment of poverty cycles, and all of these things coalesce around people who are making money from putting poisoning messages into our communities. So it is a very pressing and urgent concern.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Well, my kids eat whatever is given to them. Renee.

Renee HEATH: What you think a good strategy for supermarkets would be then?

Abe ROPITINI: At the risk of straying outside of my expertise, I think that it is important that we have Aboriginal leadership providing input into the advice that is being provided at the Commonwealth level in relation to regulation of big supermarkets and predatory conduct. I would say that that is important across the board, so I am not just referring to supermarkets there; I am referring to the tobacco industry, I am referring to the gambling industry. I think it is a real shame that we have lost our opportunity to have a Voice to Parliament that could provide the unique perspectives of Aboriginal communities in relation to the harm that is being caused through the lack of regulation and to provide input to the opportunities to improve regulation so that it is streamlined and that it is effective and that it is setting us up for a healthier future. I think that regardless of whether or not a mechanism exists in the way that we voted on last year, that advice is needed more than ever one way or another. I would not suggest a particular model – it is outside my expertise – but I do think whatever advice is being provided needs to be complemented with Aboriginal perspectives and the leadership of Aboriginal people, who have actually been fairly consistent around what they have been putting forward in the way of concerns about industry conduct for quite some time.

Renee HEATH: What have some of their concerns been?

Abe ROPITINI: If you look at, for instance, in the Northern Territory, the location of applications for permits for alcohol megastores, Aboriginal community leaders have been saying fairly consistently throughout the last few decades that the strategic positioning of those applications for permits is clearly predatory and is clearly designed to profit off addiction to those products within those communities. That is one of many examples. My organisation, VACCHO, has been fairly clear about saying that we need to limit marketing to children in proximity to schools. We also want government to take seriously measures like sugary drinks taxes. We want to take what is really a health economics approach to this as well and for reasonable policy to prevail over the interests of some pretty cashed-up lobbyists in Canberra. I do not think that is a controversial thing to say, but it does require some bravery for our elected representatives to push for sensible policy to curtail some of the harms that are being caused at the moment.

Renee HEATH: I think the rest of my questions were asked by others. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I just want to quickly follow up on that. What about education or investments in education in relation to commercials, harmful products, fast-food products and our kids, more education towards First Nations communities? Would that be of more assistance as well, besides regulatory requirements on a certain product? That way it would enable them to actually make a choice instead of saying, 'Take this away.' Education could actually make them able to make choices as they grow up. Would that be more beneficial?

Abe ROPITINI: Yes. I think that the goal should be to increase the amount of agency that Aboriginal families have and to increase their ability to exercise self-determination within their lives. So that means education is key: understanding not just how to make healthier decisions – it is actually not really about that – but, for example, how to cook a mean feed. Be under no illusions, Aboriginal families out there can cook up a mean feed, but at the moment that knowledge is distributed inequitably because we have pockets of community that are still the victims of this intergenerational trauma that I was describing earlier. So it is around Aboriginal organisations which have the trust of people to be able to provide education around cooking and around food preparation and around making decisions that are going to improve our relationship with food, and the most effective way to do that is to introduce culture into that approach. If you say to a young Aboriginal person, 'I'm going to teach you how to make a salad,' that is not as effective as saying, 'I'm going to teach you to prepare and eat what your ancestors ate, and it's going to be delicious.' That there is what activates a desire and an aspiration for people not only to be healthy but to connect to their identity and to feel that that education process is an affirmation of their identity and is an empowerment of their connection to culture.

The CHAIR: I totally agree. Any more questions from the committee at all?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I have a really seemingly random one, and this might be pushing you in terms of expertise. We were on the check-out experience just earlier. With regard to the security measures that are being increasingly introduced by the major supermarkets, I understand that in some instances those technologies have been employed using AI, and there are concerns that have been raised about the potential for structural racism to be embedded within that technology in the AI itself. With those technologies generally and how they are used in major supermarkets, do you have a view to what impacts those might have on First Nations communities?

Abe ROPITINI: I think that they, at the moment, are not well understood, and I think there is real risk for harm as a result of that. So we do not understand at the moment the extent to which AI is indicating risk. We do not fully understand the extent to which AI is then prompting the unfolding of a course of action, which in the rollout of automated camera-based technology at the point of sale within supermarkets could lead to a punitive response on the basis of how that AI is trained. We see this more broadly across the need to ensure that AI is trained well. There is absolutely a preponderance for AI tools to contribute to structural racism in the way that you have described. If, as a result of the way that that AI tool is trained, it is not adjusting for social justice factors and for the need to ensure that it is not seeing a non-white face and equating that with a higher risk of shoplifting, those are the kinds of things that need to be controlled. Those are the kinds of things that introduce the risk of injustice and the risk of harm at the point of sale in addition to all of the more underlying sorts of influence-based harms that people are already being subjected to at the checkout.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. And to be cheeky, stepping back another step from the fact that technology has been introduced at all, do you think it would be maybe better for the supermarkets to prevent theft by making their food more affordable?

Abe ROPITINI: Yes. I think that is a reasonable statement. I think that the supermarkets are one agent within that. I also think that the government response to food security and to the cost of living has been pretty poor. It has not been all that comprehensive or coordinated, and as a result of that we are seeing record rates of inflation, which I am sure I do not need to tell you about. I think that, yes, supermarkets need to be considering their role in the kinds of poverty crimes that will eventuate if prices continue to increase in an uncontrolled way, and I think that regulatory agencies and our elected representatives also have a role in ensuring that their conduct is well regulated and that there are genuine consequences in place for unconscionable conduct.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Well said. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you for your time, and right on time. Again, Abe, thank you so much for coming in and giving evidence and also to Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and all those who have put a submission in for us to consider. We definitely will take them into consideration when we make our recommendations down the track, so thank you very much for your time.

That brings this panel to an end and this session to a close. I again thank you all. And to all those viewing online, thank you very much for your time.

Committee adjourned.