Food for all Tasmanians: development of a food security strategy

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In response to a recommendation in A Social Inclusion Strategy for Tasmania in 2010 the Tasmanian government appointed a Tasmanian Food Security Council (TFSC) chaired by the Social Inclusion Commissioner to develop a Tasmanian Food Security Strategy (TFSS). This set the direction of the TFSS to focus on the equity and access to a healthy sustainable, affordable, appropriate and accessible food supply for all Tasmanians particularly the most vulnerable. This paper discusses Food Security in a Tasmanian context and the development of the TFSS; Food for All Tasmanians (FFAT).

The work of the TFSC was supported jointly by the Social Inclusion Unit in the Department of Premier and Cabinet and the Community Nutrition Unit in Population Health, Department of Health and Human Services. This effective partnership allowed cross agency collaboration to produce Food for All Tasmanians which has provided a blueprint for action aimed at improving the equity and access of the food supply with a particular focus on vulnerable groups and those at a locational disadvantage.

What is food security?

Food security refers to the ability of individuals, households and communities to acquire food that is healthy, sustainable, affordable, appropriate and accessible. Food insecurity refers to the experience of not having enough food or access to enough healthy food. It can also be applied to regular reliance on emergency food relief1. The determinants of food security involve food access and supply. Access involves the resources and capacity to acquire and use food such as transport to shops, financial resources, access to social eating environments, knowledge and skills about nutrition, and food choices. Food supply issues can include production issues for growers, location of outlets, availability, price, quality, variety and promotion.

In its broadest definition, food security can involve contentious and complex issues including food safety; foreign land ownership; protection of agricultural land; genetically modified crops; security of water and food supply; industry subsidies and tariffs; peak oil and climate change; biodiversity; industry structure; consumer rights and sustainable communities.

In part because of this complexity, it has only been in recent years that governments have begun to formulate specific food security strategies. Although food policies and plans exist in other states and territories, Food for all Tasmanians is the first state government food security strategy in Australia.

Who is most at risk of food insecurity?

The prevalence of food insecurity is about 5% of the general population. There is a strong association between levels of disadvantage and the prevalence of food insecurity. Tasmania has high levels of disadvantage compared to other states and the average household income is the lowest in Australia2.

A third of households are reliant on government pensions and allowances as their principle source of income³ and another 10-15% are the ‘working poor’. More than one third of the Tasmanian workforce is part-time and underemployment has almost doubled over the past four years⁴.

The people most at risk of food insecurity⁵ and the focus of this strategy include:

- people on low incomes, especially households dependent on government benefits and allowances
- older people, especially those who are isolated or living alone
- young people, especially children of single parent low income households
• isolated places, especially ‘food deserts’ where healthy food is difficult to get or absent. Food deserts are often in prime agricultural areas where traditional corner stores have closed as a result of demographic and industry change.\(^6\)

**How are people affected by food insecurity?**

Research shows that people living on low incomes often pay more for food in the following ways\(^7\):

• by having less disposable income to purchase a nutritious food basket
• by relying on small food outlets which charge higher prices due to less competition and higher overheads
• by having higher costs because of the need to shop frequently and in small amounts and being unable to take advantage of quantity discounts
• by having poor access to transport
• being unable to conduct thorough price searching due to constraints on time, income and transport
• from needing to go into credit arrears to free up money to purchase food resulting in a debt cycle
• from costs associated with having a diet related chronic health problem (caused by food insecurity and compromising on food quality)
• a family dependent on government benefits and allowances would need to spend 44% of their household income on food in order to eat a diet consistent with the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating. In reality, an unemployed household for example, can afford only to spend on average just 17.3% ($114.60 per week) of their income on food.

*A Cost of Living Strategy for Tasmania* and the Anglicare Tasmania report *The Price of Poverty: The Cost of Living for Low income Earners* found that many low income Tasmanian households ration, substitute less nutritious food or go without food to meet other essential costs. As a consequence, households often seek help from emergency relief services when in crisis.

Many low income households worry about whether the amount of food that they can afford to buy for their family will be enough\(^8\). A result of being food insecure often means lower levels of health and wellbeing as well as lower levels of economic participation and productive capacity. This has cost implications for the wider community.

**The approach taken to develop the FFAT**

Addressing Food Security has been on the government’s agenda since it became a focus area in the Tasmania’s Food and Nutrition Policy in 2004. It was highlighted again in the 2009 review of this policy. A recommendation to develop a Tasmanian Food Security Council to oversee the planning and delivery of a Food Security Strategy was included in *A Social Inclusion Strategy for Tasmania* released in 2009. Thus an opportunity was created to address Food Security in Tasmania using a cross sectorial approach with a joint focus on social inclusion and food and nutrition.

The TFSC formed in January 2010 bringing together nine people with backgrounds in the welfare, community development, regional development, academia, horticulture, nutrition and health, chaired by the Social Inclusion Commissioner and deputised by the Director of Population Health (DHHS). Secretarial support was provided through the Social Inclusion Unit within the Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPAC) and Physical Activity and Community Nutrition Unit (PACNU), Population Health, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). The determinants of food security are broad so the benefit of developing a food security strategy collaboratively using the skill set of the TFSC members allowed the pooling of these. This has achieved a better outcome in terms of the content of
the final TFSS and for building commitment to addressing food security in Tasmania by a range of sectors.

Given the initial wide ranging interpretation of Food Security by the TFSC members and key stakeholders around Tasmania the decision was made to consult widely. This was to ensure a certain level of consensus could be established on the scope of the TFSS. It would be ineffective to try and encompass all aspects of Food Security. Areas of overlap between and within sectors were identified and targeted, such as the intersection between emergency food relief and food security and the agricultural sector and local food production, to identify any synergies. Opportunities to address issues identified as not within scope may become available in the review of the Tasmanian Food and Nutrition Policy planned for 2014 and the development of the Commonwealths National Food Plan which is currently under way. Given the main driver for the development of the TSFC was social inclusion the purpose of the consultation process was map out on how best to address the equity and access issues for people at risk or experiencing food insecurity. Drawing on the broad experience of the TFSC membership combined with the policy experience of DPAC and expertise of the Community Nutrition Unit in Population Health (DHHS) a consultation plan was developed.

Evidence on which to set the strategic direction and content of the TFSS was gathered through a consultative, collaborative and action based approach over an 18 month period. In order to mobilise interest across a range of sectors, and to gather evidence on the need to address food security with a cross sector approach, the TFSC dispersed a round of funding (Tasmanian Food Security Fund (TFSF)) to eight coalitions of non-government and government organisations. Each coalition implemented community based food security programs or developed tools for action. Tools for a monitoring and surveillance framework were also developed. This decision to fund coalitions rather than individual organisations created its own set of challenges. However overwhelmingly it supported the notion of organisations from a range of sectors working collaboratively in a coalition model produces more outcomes and forms lasting partnerships than agencies working alone.

The on the ground activity that was generated as a result was show cased through an event hosted by the TFSC. This also provided the venue at which to discuss and workshop the scope of the TFSS. In addition key stakeholder consultations were conducted with the land use planning, agriculture, welfare, business and community sector. The inclusive process used to develop the TFSS - Food for All Tasmanians (FFAT) provided a mechanism for existing food security activity along with the newly funded activity to be considered as evidence. In addition to the TFSF projects the TFSC commissioned 2 pieces of work to add to the evidence base; The Intersection of Emergency Food Relief and Food Security and Community Food Production Tool Kit.

The outcome of the consultation and deliberation by the TFSC over its 2 year period of existence was to take a local food systems and social inclusion approach as a framework to set the strategic focus of the TFSS.

**A local food systems and social inclusion approach**

The focus of FFAT is on increasing access and supply of affordable and nutritious food and community driven approaches to food security for Tasmanians most at risk. There are four priorities to address food insecurity at a local level in Tasmania. These are:

- increasing food access and affordability
- building community food solutions
- regional development and supporting food based social enterprises
- planning for local food systems.
The strategies and priority actions are interdependent and interrelated. For example, coalitions of community food gardens build community food solutions, increase food access and affordability and can also create or support food-based social enterprises.

These priorities are part of a broader consideration of creating resilient and sustainable communities, what drives this and how local food systems can be part of the solution.

Local food systems are where:

- food is grown in the general locality in which it is consumed
- distances that the food is transported are minimised
- food processing is done in the general locality in which it is grown and consumed
- food that is grown locally can be purchased locally.

Local food systems are important because they enable people to contribute to their own wellbeing through localised sustainable solutions grounded in local contexts.

*Food for all Tasmanians* addresses food security from a social inclusion perspective and in particular, focuses on vulnerable people and places in addition to the more usual aspects of food security such as access to food, affordability, good nutrition, building resourcefulness and resilience in communities.

**Increasing food access and affordability** recognises that Tasmanians have a right to food security which supports the dignity of the person. Food therefore must be valued for its fundamental role in our social experiences, our health, the economy and the environment and responses should be tailored to the needs of identified at risk groups. Access for children in low income families may present different challenges than those for socially isolated and low income older Tasmanians. Priority actions are:

1. Support and encourage collaboration between Emergency Food Relief (EFR) providers, food distributors and food producers to improve state coverage and access for consumers.

2. Invest in sustainable, state-wide coalition food security models that connect local government, schools, children and families and older people to local, low cost and nutritious food.

3. Establish regular food basket market surveys to monitor food price and availability in disadvantaged communities.

**Building community food solutions** includes the need to engage those most at risk of food insecurity in policy making and program design. Individuals, families and communities need an environment which enables them to exercise choice and responsibility in relation to food. Collaboration is the key to enabling effective local food systems and a diversity of responses is needed to address the diversity of need. Priority actions are:

4. Make available evidence based tools and other resources which support communities to develop skills and solutions to local food security issues.

5. Invest in state-wide local produce guilds/networks to support community and school gardens.

6. Resource local government and other local community organisations to identify innovative and collaborative solutions to food security appropriate to local requirements.

**Regional development and supporting food based social enterprises** involves supporting local food production social enterprises to increase food security, in addition to developing the job readiness and business skills of participants. Food security requires viable and sustainable local food systems. Local food enterprises can contribute to local food supply and distribution as well as build food knowledge, skills and increase affordability. Priority actions are:
7. Support collaborations and initiatives that increase opportunities for Tasmanian consumers to buy locally produced food.

8. Facilitate the establishment of food-related social enterprises as part of supporting sustainable local food systems. This will involve fostering relationships between large industry and small business operators through skills development mentoring programs and increasing access to finance and social enterprise innovation funds.

9. Promote social procurement by all tiers of government through contractual arrangements which preference social outcomes for local food systems.

**Planning for sustainable local food systems** encourages effective planning schemes, urban planning decisions and the use of public spaces in urban areas to contribute to food security. Planning initiatives also enhance stewardship of natural resources in the face of challenges such as climate change and peak oil. Priority actions are:


11. Invest in food sensitive planning strategies for Tasmania.

12. Strengthen the evidence base for food security policy, planning and programs.

**Beyond the TFSS**

The FFAT provides direction to decision makers and policy makers on where to best place implementation effort over the short, medium and longer term. It also identifies the need for a comprehensive set of agreed-upon indicators to determine the nature, extent and evolution of food insecurity, both to develop appropriate responses and to monitor their effectiveness.

The FFAT was the framework on which a recent Tasmanian Government grant round to address the cost of living was distributed. This fund was called Food for All Tasmanians. It provided a good chance for effective investment in food security through recipients designing programs that meet the FFAT’s strategic direction. In addition FFAT provides government agencies with key messaging around food security from an equity and access focus.

Given there is no longer a TFSC there is the risk the momentum and cross sector interest generated as a result of developing the FFAT, the work undertaken through TFSS projects and when the Food for All Tasmanians Grant projects cease, action to address food security may diminish. Sustainability of projects was a key funding criterion however in reality efforts usually taper off. A step taken to address this within Population Health (DHHS) is to support the Tasmanian Food Security Network. This group comprises of fund recipients, key stakeholders identified in the development of the TFSS and ex TFSC members. Regular E-news and video conferenced meetings are arranged for networking and professional development.

There is now a better evidence base and stakeholder network around Food Security to utilise in the 2014 review of the whole of government’s Tasmanian Food and Nutrition Policy. This will keep Food Security on the government agenda and provide leadership for the non government sector to follow suit.

**Recommendation**

1. Use a cross sectoral collaborative approach, in order to develop an effective strategic approach to addressing food security.

2. Long term sustainability of addressing food security requires a cross sectorial governance model such as Food Security Council and this needs to be established at the outset.
References


