

Towards a Healthy, Regenerative and Equitable Food System in Victoria

A Consensus Statement



Acknowledgments

This Consensus Statement was prepared and approved by VicHealth and the Food Systems and Food Security Working Group in December 2021.

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Working Group acknowledges the Traditional Custodians throughout Victoria, their enduring connections to land, sea, sky and community and pays its respects to Elders past and present. In the spirit of reconciliation, the Working Group affirms that the Traditional Custodians never ceded these lands, and severe and enduring harm has ensued. The Working Group recognises the food sovereignty of Victoria's First Nations peoples and their rights to self-determine their food systems and extends that recognition to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

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Supporters of the Consensus Statement



Foreword by Prof. Mark Lawrence

A healthy, regenerative and equitable food system is a fundamental prerequisite for personal, population and planetary health and well-being. For millennia First Nations peoples thrived as they enjoyed such a food system(s) in the land we now know as Victoria. A little over 200 years after colonisation, that food system has transitioned to one that is unhealthy, ecologically disruptive, and inequitable. Although it is unrealistic to transition 'back' to Victoria's pre-colonisation food system, transitioning towards a future food system that reinstates health, environmental and social qualities into its structure and operation is vital for the population's survival.

Towards a Healthy, Regenerative, and Equitable Food System in Victoria: A Consensus Statement is a timely and powerful call to action for the State and Local Governments and others to bring about the urgently needed transition to the Victorian food system. The Consensus Statement continues Victoria's global leadership in tackling food system challenges. In 1987 the state government launched a comprehensive Food and nutrition policy – the first of its type anywhere in the world. However, the Consensus Statement is more than just another food policy document. It provides a critical analysis of the Victorian food system's underlying social, political and ecological determinants. It articulates a shared vision of what a healthy, regenerative and equitable food system in Victoria would look like. And crucially, it outlines actions to challenge the current determinants and achieve the shared vision.

Recognition of the need to transition food systems now dominates the thinking behind activities ranging from global food systems summits to local food production, processing, distribution and retail innovations. What this transition might look like is contested. Some stakeholders believe the solution to a broken food system involves a 'productionist' agenda characterised by increasing investment in technological innovations to create larger food production yields and more efficient food processing. Such developments can make an important contribution, though of themselves will not be sufficient to bring about the necessary transition to avert current threats of wide-scale ecological breakdown and endemic food insecurity. Increasingly, practitioners and researchers are identifying that the scale of the transition needs to extend beyond simple adjustments and nudges to different components of the food system. Instead, a fundamental transformation of the whole food system is required.

The Victorian Food Systems and Food Security Working Group, established under the auspices of VicHealth, is to be congratulated for producing this Consensus Statement and incorporating guidance on how a food system transformation can be accomplished. Grounded in a rights-based approach, the Working Group has proposed ten 'leverage points' which collectively will create the conditions necessary to drive a transition towards a healthy, regenerative and equitable food system. Each of these leverage points is underpinned by research and so informed by supporting evidence. The leverage points' description is also accompanied by insightful case studies to illustrate global best practices and demonstrate that transitions are already underway. Helping translate the Consensus Statement's valuable recommendations into urgent and meaningful activities now requires all of us to support its call on State and Local Governments and others to act.

Mark Lawrence
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Executive Summary

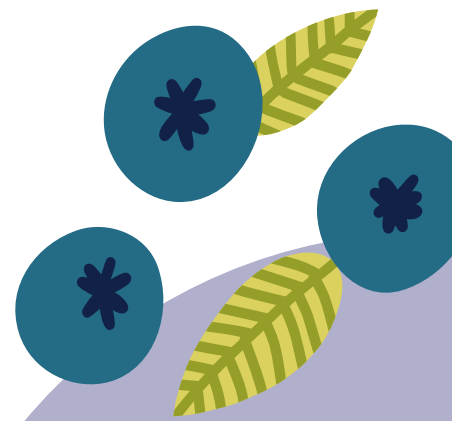
Life on Earth is imminently facing its biggest ever threats with multiple converging crises, including rapid global warming and abrupt climate change, the degradation of our planetary life-support systems and growing public health disparities. Our food system – the way we feed ourselves – is a major engine powering these crises.

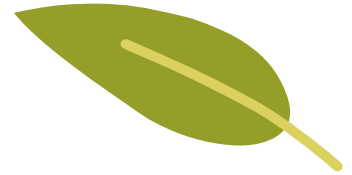
Yet, while we have known of these crises for decades, the events of the past two years, including bushfire devastation, unprecedented floods and COVID-19, have shone a bright light on the extreme shortcomings of our food system. Not least, the extensive disruption and economic impact of COVID-19, including multiple lockdowns, business closures and cutbacks of social welfare (after JobSeeker supplements ended) has meant that food insecurity is a more prevalent and growing issue – with almost 1 in 4 Victorians (23%) reportedly relying on a restricted range of low-cost unhealthy foods due to running out of money.¹

Though more apparent, food insecurity is not a new phenomenon in Victoria nor is it an inevitable outcome of crisis, COVID-19 or otherwise. Rather, food insecurity is the consequence of our systems, which in turn are shaped by political choices, failing to ensure that people live in circumstances in which they can provide adequate food for themselves.^{1,2} We can and must do better to create the right conditions for a prosperous society and a healthy and sustainable food future for all.

In the context of rising food insecurity, the Victorian Food Systems and Food Security Working Group was established in April 2020 under the auspices of the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) to help coordinate the food relief response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Working Group membership was drawn from across the food system and included farmers, food relief organisations, social enterprises, academia, peak nutrition organisations and statutory bodies. After initially developing a plan to safeguard acute food security, the Working Group shifted attention to prioritising action towards ensuring long-term food security. This Consensus Statement is the outcome of that work.

Towards a Healthy, Regenerative, and Equitable Food System in Victoria articulates a shared vision to guide the necessary transition of Victoria's food system. In line with evidence and global best practice, the Consensus Statement adopts a rights-based food systems approach to ensure that the path of transition is fair and inclusive and that decision making processes are underpinned by the human rights principles of Participation, Accountability, Non-discrimination, Transparency, Human Dignity, Empowerment and Rule of Law following the PANTHER framework.³ The Consensus Statement proposes ten mutually reinforcing policy priorities, which call for action on key leverage points that, if implemented, would have the best chance of transition towards the healthy, regenerative and equitable food system needed.





Leverage Point 1: Right to Food Law

Create an enabling policy environment to transform Victoria's food system by legislating the right to food in Victoria and embedding it into all relevant State and Local Government policies, budgeting processes and activities.

Leverage Point 2: Food Systems Governance

Strengthen food systems governance capacity by establishing a whole-of-government Food Systems Committee to oversee the participatory development and implementation of a Victorian Food System Strategy and Investment Plan.

Leverage Point 3: Food Systems Monitoring

Advance better food systems strategy and policy design by establishing a comprehensive performance measurement and monitoring framework in Victoria's State of the Environment Report.

Leverage Point 4: Agroecological Food Production

Support the transition to regenerative farming practices to enhance ecological function and build resilience by proactively supporting and resourcing agroecological solutions.

Leverage Point 5: Local Food Infrastructure

Strengthen local and regional food systems by creating a Local Food Investment Fund to grow capacity, improve coordination and drive efficiencies in local food infrastructure.

Leverage Point 6: Public Sector Food Procurement and Retail

Transition all public sector food procurement and retail to preference healthy and sustainably produced food sourced locally or regionally by developing compulsory social and ethical food procurement and retail standards and implementation assistance.

Leverage Point 7: School Food Systems

Transform Victorian school food systems and enhance food systems literacy by working with our educational community and allocating appropriate resourcing and investment.

Leverage Point 8: Community Food Systems Strategies

Require, empower and resource local councils to lead the participatory development of community food system strategies by amending the Public Health and Well-being Act 2008.

Leverage Point 9: Community Food Systems Planning

Prioritise and promote healthy community food systems by reforming Victorian Planning Provisions legislation to explicitly state the promotion of health, alongside economic, environmental and social well-being considerations.

Leverage Point 10: Food Relief Models

Improve dignified access to fresh and healthy food by developing a new, coordinated and collaborative approach with the food relief sector.

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Our Food System at a Crossroads

Life on Earth is imminently facing its biggest ever threats with multiple converging crises, including rapid global warming and abrupt climate change, the degradation of our planetary life-support systems and growing public health disparities. Our food system – the way we feed ourselves – is a major engine powering these crises.

Food and fibre production in Victoria use over half of the state's landmass, and the agricultural sector contributes 14% of the state's net greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) – the fourth largest share of total emissions behind electricity generation, transport and direct combustion.^{4,5} While we have known of these crises for decades, the events of the past two years, including bushfire devastation, unprecedented floods and COVID-19, have shone a bright light on the extreme shortcomings of our food system. Not least, the extensive disruption and economic impact of COVID-19, including multiple lockdowns, business closures and cutbacks of social welfare (after JobSeeker supplements ended) has meant that food insecurity is a more prevalent and growing issue – almost 1 in 4 Victorians (23%) reportedly relying on a restricted range of low-cost unhealthy foods due to running out of money.¹

The cost of food insecurity is substantial now, and it will burden generations well into the future.^{6,7} Yet while more apparent, food insecurity is not a new phenomenon in Victoria nor is it an inevitable outcome of crisis, COVID-19 or otherwise. Rather, food insecurity is the consequence of our systems, which in turn are shaped by political choices, failing to ensure that people live in circumstances in which they can provide adequate food for themselves.^{1,2}

Despite these challenges, it is in the midst of crises and uncertainty that communities and organisations have come together and found creative ways of adapting to their emerging circumstances. All around us, we can see new possibilities for (re)organising ourselves around food and perhaps like never before, we have an opportunity to be open-minded to where these possibilities may lead.⁸

In recognition that we stand at a pivotal crossroads, this Consensus Statement results from people coming together and asking the questions that may lead to new possibilities for our food system – to reshape our food system and build a healthy and food-secure future for everyone, everywhere, at all times – a food system to nourish all.

What is wrong with business as usual?

While there are many different ways of configuring our food system, today, the dominant model organises around an unsustainable growth imperative; the need to produce the highest output at the lowest cost and generate as much profit as possible in the shortest amount of time. This fundamental (yet often hidden) rule is what drives and shapes the industrial food system – it is its organizing principle and logic and how we measure its contribution to society in our accounting systems. Like the rules of a game, it is this output and profit maximisation orientation that structures the food system's behaviour in ways that form the particular patterns of production and consumption which are everywhere we look, including industrial farming, extensive processing to create ultra-processed foods, concentrated, retail-led systems, diets laden with the outputs of these profitable (for some) endeavours and atrocious volumes of packaging and food waste. These patterns are interconnected, predictable and doggedly persist despite perpetuating substantial social, health and environmental burdens.

In terms of environmental health, each connection in the food system requires varying amounts of energy (from renewable and non-renewable sources) and generates or stores warming GHGs. Australia's food system is organised in a way that makes it energy and emissions-intensive – amounting to 30-40% of Australia's total GHGs and accounting for the most food-related emissions per capita globally, and not by a small margin.⁹ A large proportion of emissions comes from industrial agriculture, which is heavily dependent on synthetic fertilizers and other fossil fuel derived agrochemicals.

The reliance on fertilizers to maintain or improve soil fertility is costly for farmers and disrupts the functioning of soils ecosystems. Our soil is a non-renewable resource, judged by the average human lifespan. On average, it takes about a thousand years to form 10 cm of soil, but current rates of soil loss at 1 cm a year is vastly outpacing the Earth's regenerative capacity.¹⁰ Given average topsoil depths around much of Australia's arable landscapes are around 20 cm, the loss of 1 cm of soil a year is a critical issue that threatens food security in the short term. Soil degradation has also been exacerbated by the widespread removal of deep-rooted native vegetation and replacement with (non-native) annual crops and perennial pastures, which in turn has promulgated habitat destruction, biodiversity loss and water scarcity.¹¹⁻¹³

There are further significant challenges to the resilience of our food system. While we produce significantly more food than we can eat and export almost two-thirds by volume, we remain vulnerable to shortfalls in the domestic supply of fruit and vegetables – the very foundation of nutritious diets. Modelling suggests that even at current levels of vegetable consumption, which are far below recommendations for good health, Australia's vegetable production will only meet 62% of domestic demand in 2050.^{14,15} The significant concentration of power in the food system also compromises its resilience. Concentration is especially notable at the retail stage, where two companies dominate the market. This imbalance of bargaining power can lead to unfair trading practices, which disadvantages producers, particularly small and medium-size, and generate financial stress among farmers.^{16,17}

In terms of people's health, the food system also generates crises at every point. According to numerous leading health organisations, the health impacts of pesticides and the hormone-disrupting chemicals that leach from food packaging into our bodies pose a serious and urgent threat to public health.¹⁸ Much of the food we now eat has changed beyond recognition from what our species evolved to thrive on over 200,000 years and our ancient ancestors before then. A large part of these changes is due to ultra-processing, which may include adding fats, sugar and salt, which our bodies are ill-equipped to deal with. Australians are the sixth-highest purchaser of ultra-processed foods globally, and these supply around a third of energy intakes.^{19,20} As our bodies deal with the strain of improper nourishment, nutritionally poor dietary patterns lead to long-term ill-health, including cardiovascular disease, some cancers and type 2 diabetes. In 2018, dietary risks contributed to 50% of coronary heart disease and 26% of stroke burden, 26% of bowel cancer burden and 26% of type 2 diabetes burden.²¹⁻²³

Laid bare, these stark figures are a sobering assessment of just some of the myriad true costs of our food system. Costs that are often not only invisible and consequently overlooked but are not included in the price we pay at the till and so give an illusion that food is cheap. But cheap food is a fallacy.²⁴ In reality, it is clear that the actual costs of our food system are borne beyond the supermarket receipt or share price – usually in our communities through compromised health and well-being and in our natural systems, which are depleted and degraded, even though we ultimately depend on them for survival.

It is a remarkable feat that our food system comes at such a high cost for us all, without even fulfilling the goal of nourishing our communities. Yet, there is enormous potential to derive collective benefits by dispensing these costs. But what is holding us back?



What keeps our current food system in place?

Socio-ecological systems like food systems, do not materialise in a vacuum - their structures, processes and properties are shaped by the cumulation of political choices (or political inertia) over time about how society should be organised and what should be prioritised. Moreover, despite mounting evidence of the spiralling costs, perverse incentives throughout our current food system and between the food system and other systems now lock us into this particular way of meeting our needs (Figure 1). Some examples of lock-ins include sunk costs (e.g., public and private investment in knowledge-based and material assets), jobs and earnings, interdependent food industry networks, economies of scale, the corporate concentration of power, population lifestyles (e.g., increasing reliance on ultra-processed foods), globalisation (in that it can constrain the efficacy of national, state and local policies), short-termism and linear or compartmentalised thinking.^{25,26}

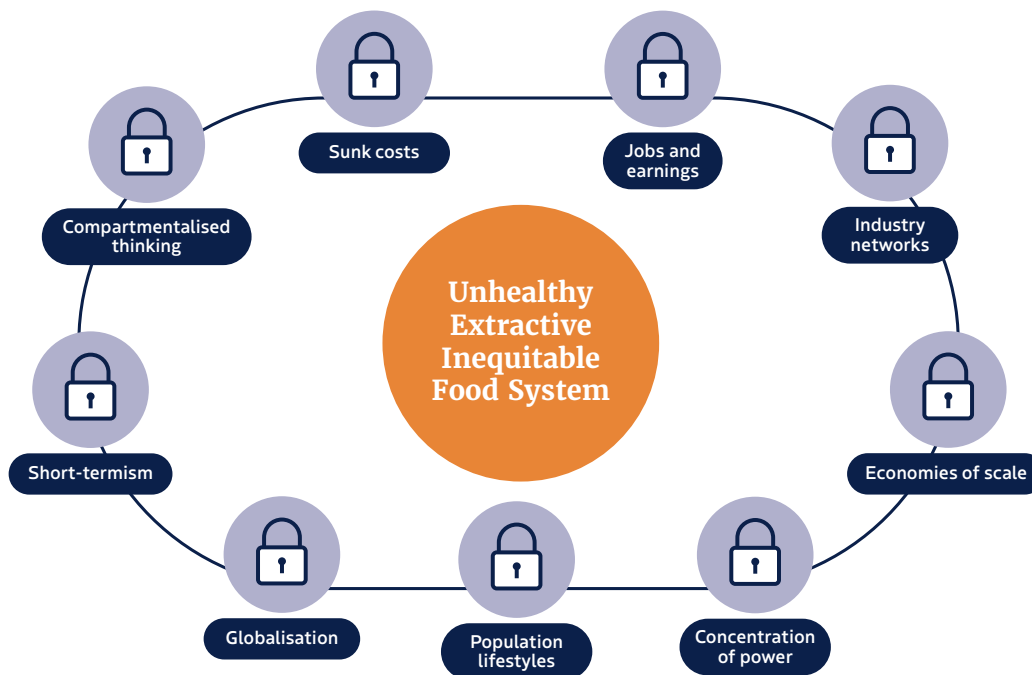


Figure 1. Food System Lock-ins

Adapted from Geels, F., et al., *Sustainability Transitions: Policy and Practice*. 2019 and *iPES-Food, From Uniformity to Diversity: A Paradigm Shift From Industrial Agriculture to Diversified Agroecological Systems*. 2016, International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems.

Failure to appreciate the political context of systems and the existence of lock-ins and identify and address them using a systems approach leads to prosaic and reactive policies directed at ‘solving’ problems as they emerge. Though sometimes unavoidable, this approach will not transform the system structures and processes (i.e., root causes) that generate the issues in the first place. Instead, by focusing all attention on optimising our current system, we will remain locked onto the same path but dealing with a new set of problems - inequalities will not be resolved; rather, they will become even more entrenched and pronounced.

As a pertinent example, the current approach to addressing the problem of food insecurity centres on expanding the capacity of food relief programs that provide food to people in times of need. Food relief is undoubtedly invaluable for recipients; however, in a country that meets 89% of its food needs domestically as Australia does, food insecurity is not caused by a lack of food. Food insecurity is the outcome of our systems failing to ensure that people live in circumstances in which they can provide adequate food for themselves.² Examples of system failures include precarious livelihoods - stagnant and low wages, unemployment and under-employment, inadequate social security payments and support, insecure/unaffordable housing, unequal distribution of productive resources including land, cost of living pressures including increasing prices of healthy foods, particularly vegetables and fruit, and conversely, the proliferation of low-cost, ultra-processed unhealthy foods.

Addressing food insecurity is not, therefore, achieved by providing food for free or more cheaply, but by reorganising our systems, to enable for instance, increased incomes (including within the food system itself) so that everyone can purchase food at its real cost - rather than cheapening food to the detriment of human health and social and environmental systems. This is why the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and other independent bodies concerned with the sustainability of our food system are calling for a *radical transformation* of our food system by boldly reshaping the *underlying principles* that organise it from production to consumption.²⁷

Where to from here?

To transform our food system so that, as a matter of course, it generates healthy, regenerative and equitable patterns of production and provision will entail reorientating it around different principles that prioritise life - human and ecological health (as indivisible) - rather than short-term profits. If this seems like a lofty goal, that's because it is. Metaphorically speaking, we are tasking ourselves with redesigning the plane we are in mid-flight.²⁸ But the scale of change involved in reaching this goal does not make it unachievable. It just means that firstly, it is more important than ever that we work together towards it, especially by elevating the voices of people that are most disadvantaged by current arrangements, including those that speak for nature. And secondly, that we are open to the idea that the way we feed ourselves can be otherwise - that the undesirable properties of our food system are not accidental or inevitable but are a consequence of the decisions we take about how to organise society. Re-design is not only necessary; it is possible and well within reach.

Systems are reshaped by acting on leverage points - the places where relatively small changes can permeate outwards to produce significant changes in the system at large.²⁹ Leverage points hold the possibility of unlocking path-breaking models of production and provisioning. In our food system, leverage points include laws and governance models, how we choose to judge its performance, redirecting public spending on food, empowering communities to strengthen their local food systems together with their local councils and make use of strengthened planning laws that support the changes they would like to see. For food producers, it is about creating an enabling space for them to explore, with each other, practices that work with the environment (as opposed to doing less damage to it) - using the health of ecological systems as a basis for design. For our schoolchildren, it is about cultivating ecologically-orientated mindsets to enrich the worldview of the next generation of farmers, food producers and food citizens.³⁰

Working with leverage points calls for a seismic shift in mindsets from dealing with problems to cultivating 'whole-systems thinking' and creating the conditions in which alternative ways of organising our food system can arise and find a foothold. As we have seen with the response to COVID-19, individuals and communities are naturally creative - they will self-organise and experiment when they have the space and capacity to do so - this is human nature. People want to build a bright future for all. Indeed, many have already started (or never really stopped), and we have much to learn from their endeavours.

Transforming the way we feed ourselves in Victoria will be essential to meet global commitments in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and our climate pledges to reach net-zero emissions by 2050 and interim reduction targets before then. Fortunately, the Victorian Government is well-positioned to show leadership for food systems transformation. Its commitment to bushfire recovery, climate change, circular economy and rebuilding a fair and robust economy (post-COVID-19) provides a solid policy platform for developing an integrated and well-resourced pathway forwards.

The Victorian Food Systems and Food Security Working Group

The Victorian Food Systems and Food Security Working Group (the Working Group) was established in April 2020 under the auspices of the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) to help coordinate the food relief response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Working Group membership was drawn from across the food system and included farmers, food relief organisations, social enterprises, academia, peak nutrition organisations, and statutory bodies. After initially developing a plan to safeguard acute food security, the Working Group shifted attention to prioritising action towards ensuring long-term food security. This Consensus Statement is the outcome of that work.

Towards a Healthy, Regenerative, and Equitable Food System in Victoria: A Consensus Statement articulates a collective reimagining of our food system in Victoria. The Consensus Statement is grounded in evidence, global best practice and adopts a rights-based food systems approach. It proposes ten mutually reinforcing policy priorities, which call for action on key leverage points that the Victorian State and Local Government(s) and others should implement to catalyse the transition towards the healthy, regenerative and equitable food system needed. The breadth of cross-sector support for this Consensus Statement recognises the importance of this work.

The approach taken to develop the Consensus Statement is in [Appendix 1](#).



Towards a Healthy, Regenerative and Equitable Food System in Victoria

A Consensus Statement by cross-sector organisations to catalyse a transition towards a healthy, regenerative and equitable food system in Victoria by activating key leverage points for change and calling on State and Local Governments and others to act.

This Consensus Statement articulates a shared vision, guiding principles and actions that governments, communities and individuals should take to mobilise a transition towards a healthy, regenerative and equitable food future for all Victorians. Implicit in the Consensus Statement's recommendations is a recognition that this transition, though critical, is not inevitable. Multiple factors keep us locked onto a path that is unhealthy, extractive and inequitable.

Unlocking path-breaking models of production and provisioning is contingent on cultivating the enabling conditions for different, values-based food system practices and arrangements to emerge from our farmers, food producers and communities, and for these to scale out and prevail (Figure 2).³¹ In turn, enabling conditions hinge upon ensuring that the transition process is participatory and inclusive – that who gets to move us forwards and who decides how we will get there - is grounded in a rights-based food systems approach.



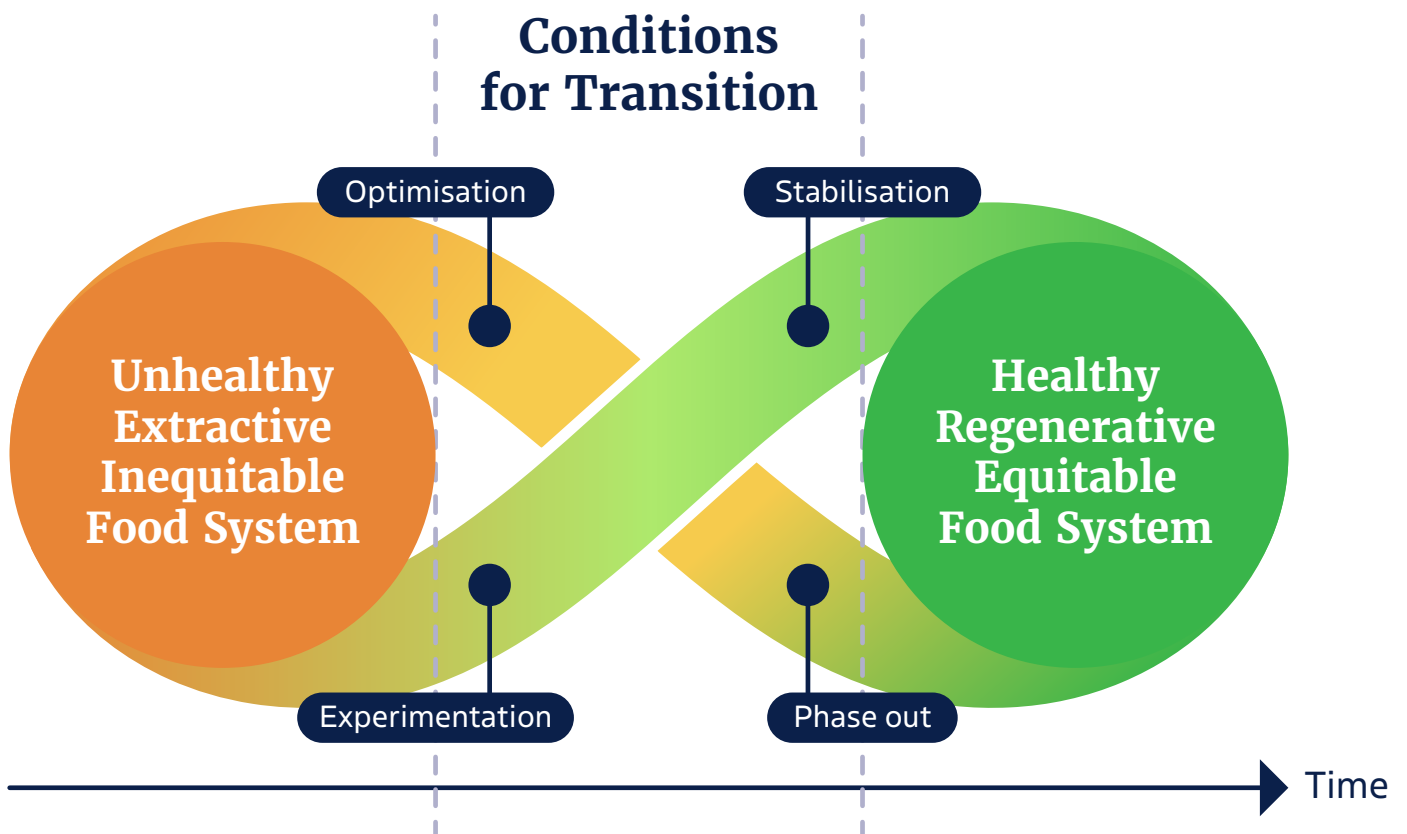


Figure 2. Food System Transition

Adapted from: Loorbach, D., Frantzeskaki, N. and Avelino, F. Sustainability Transitions Research: Transforming Science and Practice for Societal Change. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 2017. 42(1): p. 599-626.

Food System Vision

An equitable, regenerative, prosperous and resilient food system that ensures access to healthy and culturally appropriate food for all Victorians; a system that values nourishment, fairness, dignity, democracy, participation, inclusivity and stewardship of the natural environment.

Guiding Principles

Upholds

the right to food unconditionally - meaning that all Victorians, at all times, enjoy dignified access to healthy and culturally appropriate food that is produced and exchanged fairly, in ways that regenerate agroecosystems.

Values

inclusion, self-determination and adopts a rights-based approach so that people, especially historically disadvantaged groups, participate in the decisions and activities to (re) shape the food system.

Provides

healthy foods within planetary boundaries – diverse, nutritious, minimally processed foods that are produced and exchanged through agroecological and circular economy principles – conserving water, regenerating soil and promoting biodiversity while cutting greenhouse gas emissions, food and packaging waste and pollution.

Strengthens

local and regional food economies - fostering social connection, diversification and resilience, and creating rewarding job opportunities.

Cultivates

food literacy in the broader context of ecoliteracy - the vital knowledge and skills to sustainably grow, prepare and enjoy healthy food.

Promotes

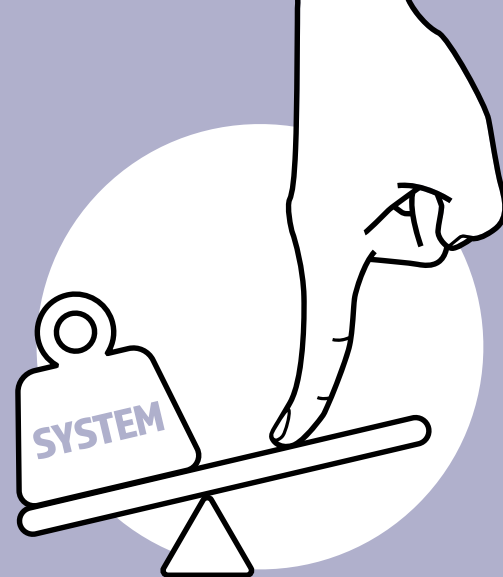
fair incomes and working practices for farmers and food workers and ensures animals equal regard and compassion.

Celebrates

the traditional food practices of Victoria's multiple ethnicities and diverse communities.

Leverage Points

The Working Group has identified the following leverage points as crucial opportunities to promote the necessary conditions for a fair transition to a healthy, regenerative and equitable food system:



Leverage Point 1: Right to Food Law

Create an enabling policy environment to transform Victoria's food system by legislating the right to food in Victoria and embedding it into all relevant State and Local Government policies, budgeting processes and activities.

Leverage Point 2: Food Systems Governance

Strengthen food systems governance capacity by establishing a whole-of-government Food Systems Committee to oversee the participatory development and implementation of a Victorian Food System Strategy and Investment Plan.

Leverage Point 3: Food Systems Monitoring

Advance better food systems strategy and policy design by establishing a comprehensive performance measurement and monitoring framework in Victoria's State of the Environment Report.

Leverage Point 4: Agroecological Food Production

Support the transition to regenerative farming practices to enhance ecological function and build resilience by proactively supporting and resourcing agroecological solutions.

Leverage Point 5: Local Food Infrastructure

Strengthen local and regional food systems by creating a Local Food Investment Fund to grow capacity, improve coordination and drive efficiencies in local food infrastructure.

Leverage Point 6: Public Sector Food Procurement and Retail

Transition all public sector food procurement and retail to preference healthy and sustainably produced food sourced locally or regionally by developing compulsory social and ethical food procurement and retail standards and implementation assistance.

Leverage Point 7: School Food Systems

Transform Victorian school food systems and enhance food systems literacy by working with our educational community and allocating appropriate resourcing and investment.

Leverage Point 8: Community Food Systems Strategies

Require, empower and resource local councils to lead the participatory development of community food system strategies by amending the Public Health and Well-being Act 2008.

Leverage Point 9: Community Food Systems Planning

Prioritise and promote healthy community food systems by reforming Victorian Planning Provisions legislation to explicitly state the promotion of health, alongside economic, environmental and social well-being considerations.

Leverage Point 10: Food Relief Models

Improve dignified access to fresh and healthy food by developing a new, coordinated and collaborative approach with the food relief sector.

Supporting Evidence



Leverage Point 1: Right to Food Law

Create an enabling policy environment to transform Victoria's food system by legislating the right to food in Victoria and embedding it into all relevant State and Local Government policies, budgeting processes and activities.

The core purpose of our food system should be to ensure that all Victorians, at all times, enjoy the right to dignified access to healthy and culturally appropriate food that is produced and exchanged fairly in ways that regenerate agroecosystems. However, rising food insecurity, diet-related disease, environmental degradation and social inequalities show that our current food system is not pursuing this life-giving function and is failing our communities, especially our most vulnerable. While Australia is a signatory to international human rights laws that formally recognise the right to food, we need to incorporate provisions into Victorian legislation to allocate responsibility and establish the food systems governance mechanisms, policies, investment, monitoring and enforcement to uphold these rights.

The right to food has been internationally recognised as a human right since its inclusion in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The right to food is “*realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement*”.³² The right to food is the legal concept and, as with all human rights, entails three forms of obligations for the government to 1. *Respect* the right to food – to not interfere with a person’s ability to access food, 2. *Protect* the right to food – to ensure that others do not interfere with a person’s ability to access food and 3. *Fulfil* the right to food – to pro-actively engage in activities intended to strengthen people’s access to and utilization of resources and means to ensure their livelihood, including food security, and provide food to people in an emergency or in circumstances where self-provisioning is beyond their control.³³ In other words, upholding the right to food means a government is duty-bound to undertake the necessary steps to ensure that people live in circumstances in which they can provide for themselves and their families and achieve food security (Box 1) with freedom and dignity.

To date, at least 45 countries have taken the step of institutionalising human rights obligations in their legal protections, including through constitutional recognition or in legislative frameworks. While most examples are at a national constitutional level, precedent for sub-national level adoption also exists, including the US state of Maine, which recently updated its constitution (see case study). The Australian Human Rights Commission states that “*to ensure that the human rights standards contained in international treaties are observed and enforceable within Australia, the government must introduce them into domestic law*”.³⁴ So, while Australia is a signatory to international human rights laws that recognise and agree to the fundamental right to food *in principle*, this right is not recognised in domestic law, including the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities (Box 2) and relevant government policy frameworks, meaning it cannot be legally enforced *in practice*.

One of the most powerful leverage points for change in a system is its purpose because it is this that shapes a system's structure and processes and lies at the heart of all of its behaviour.²⁹ As it stands, the purpose of our food system is not written into our laws which means that the State Government lacks the legal power to invoke the transformational changes needed to our food system, and Victorians cannot hold the government accountable to meet their obligations in this regard. To strengthen food systems governance capacity and address the systemic causes of food insecurity, the Victorian Government should introduce a Right to Food Act to amend the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 and provide the formal mechanism to uphold these rights. Implementation of the Right to Food law, and in particular, where local governments and communities have responsibility, must have adequate financing and resourcing (see also [Leverage Point 2: Food Systems Governance](#), [Leverage Point 5: Local Food Infrastructure](#) and [Leverage Point 8: Community Food System Strategies](#)).



Box 1: Food Security

Food security is not simply a situation where people are free of hunger. If this were so, the response to food insecurity would be to ensure people don't go to bed hungry at night, and policies would be geared around producing more food as cheaply as possible to achieve this outcome. But these actions would only address the immediate 'problem' of hunger. They would not manage the systems that manifest hunger in the first place (including food systems), nor would they recognise that freedom from hunger is not the end goal for a thriving and prosperous society.

The concept of food security extends beyond freedom from hunger to incorporate six interconnected dimensions:

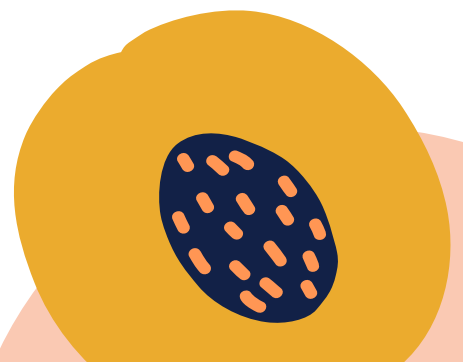
1. Agency – people individually or collectively can decide what foods they produce and eat, how to produce and distribute that food and participate in processes that shape food systems.
2. Stability – people have adequate access to food at all times, including not risk losing access to food due to sudden shocks.
3. Sustainability – food systems provide food security and nutrition in a way that does not compromise the economic, social and environmental bases that generate food security and nutrition for future generations.
4. Access – people can access adequate resources, including suitable legal, political, economic and social arrangements for acquiring appropriate foods for a nutritious diet.
5. Availability – food systems provide sufficient quantities of food of appropriate quality.
6. Utilization – people can utilize food through adequate diet, clean water, sanitation and health care to reach a state of nutrition well-being and satisfy all physiological needs.²⁷





Box 2: Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities' 20 Rights

1. Right to recognition and equality before the law (section 8)
2. Right to life (section 9)
3. Right to protection from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment (section 10)
4. Right to freedom from forced work (section 11)
5. Right to freedom of movement (section 12)
6. Right to privacy and reputation (section 13)
7. Right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief (section 14)
8. Right to freedom of expression (section 15)
9. Right to peaceful assembly and freedom of association (section 16)
10. Right to protection of families and children (section 17)
11. Right to take part in public life (section 18)
12. Cultural rights (section 19)
13. Property rights (section 20)
14. Right to liberty and security of person (section 21)
15. Right to humane treatment when deprived of liberty (section 22)
16. Rights of children in the criminal process (section 23)
17. Right to a fair hearing (section 24)
18. Rights in criminal proceedings (section 25)
19. Right not to be tried or punished more than once (section 26)
20. Retrospective criminal laws (section 27)





Case Study: Right to Food Law in Maine

Incorporating Right to Food into a State-level Constitution

In November 2021, 60% of voters in the US state of Maine approved an amendment to the state's constitution to add a right to food clause into Maine's declaration of Rights, stating:

Right to food: All individuals have a natural, inherent and unalienable right to food, including the right to save and exchange seeds and the right to grow, raise, harvest, produce and consume the food of their own choosing for their own nourishment, sustenance, bodily health and well-being, as long as an individual does not commit trespassing, theft, poaching or other abuses of private property rights, public lands or natural resources in the harvesting, production or acquisition of food.



Maine Constitution, Article 1, §25

The right to food amendment, the first of its kind in the US, had already been cleared by the state legislature earlier in the year (it passed by 73% House and 70% Senate), which then sent it to voters following the state's rules for amending the constitution. Reports suggest similar provisions are being considered in other US states.³⁵

This constitutional update follows a long history in developing progressive food laws, which gives residents more control over how their food is grown, distributed and sold. In 2007, Maine became the first US state to introduce an explicit food sovereignty law – An Act to Recognise Local Control Regarding Food Systems - which permits municipalities to regulate their local food systems.

To date, the food sovereignty law has prompted nearly 100 Maine cities and towns (of 500) to pass local ordinances (formerly titled Local Food and Community Self-Governance Ordinance). A key driver for the food sovereignty law has been the protection and promotion of small-scale farmers who were previously subject to exorbitant regulatory compliance costs to adhere to regulations designed for larger operators.³⁶ The diffusion of these local ordinances has spurred interest from small growers and producers, as the law allows them to sell directly to customers on-site.³⁷

Other states, including Montana, Wyoming, Colorado and North Dakota, have introduced similar legislation.



Leverage Point 2: Food Systems Governance

Strengthen food systems governance capacity by establishing a whole-of-government Food Systems Committee to oversee the participatory development and implementation of a Victorian Food System Strategy and Investment Plan.

Realizing the right to food is not solely a means of addressing food insecurity but is a distinct objective in itself – guiding an approach to food systems governance that is founded on the principles of dignity and accountability and that seeks to address the underlying structures and processes that give rise to the problem of food insecurity in the first place. Despite extensive knowledge of the issues associated with our current food system, the pace of transition to a healthy, regenerative and equitable food system is slow – held up in part by a compartmentalized and short-term approach to policy development. However, siloed policymaking is ineffective in responding to entrenched, cross-cutting systemic challenges. We need an integrated and rights-based governance model that reaches across political boundaries, transcends electoral cycles and meets the needs of Victorians where they are.

The events of the past two years, including bushfire devastation, unprecedented floods and COVID-19, have shone a bright light on the extreme shortcomings of our food system. Not least, the extensive disruption and economic impact of COVID-19, including multiple lockdowns, business closures and cutbacks of social welfare (after JobSeeker supplements ended) has meant that food insecurity is a more prevalent and growing issue – estimated to affect almost 1 in 4 Victorians.¹ These multiple converging crises and other contextual pressures, including (but not limited to) population growth, urbanization, climate change and the rapid degradation of nature, warrant a new integrated, long-term approach to food governance based on systems thinking. The Victorian Government is well-positioned to show leadership across the whole food system and has a proven track record of working effectively towards a common agenda across portfolios. Recent examples of the [Regional Jobs and Infrastructure Fund](#), [Recycling Victoria: A New Economy](#), childhood obesity prevention, [Health and Human Services Climate Change Adaptation Action Plan](#), [Planning for Melbourne's Green Wedge](#), and [Agricultural Land](#) and [Agriculture Workforce Plan](#), are cases in point.

A food systems governance model which integrates considerations across the totality of the food system must also facilitate and ensure participation by Victorians – especially by elevating the voices of people that are most disadvantaged and impacted by current arrangements, including those that speak for nature. Adopting a rights-based approach to food systems transformation is critical for ensuring a fair and inclusive transition because it means that decision making processes for food systems governance are underpinned by the human rights principles of Participation, Accountability, Non-discrimination, Transparency, Human Dignity, Empowerment and Rule of Law following the PANTHER framework.⁵ A recent systematic review concluded that rights-based approaches, including the right to food and food sovereignty, have demonstrated potential to strengthen efforts to improve food security across a wide range of contexts.³⁸

A suitable mechanism to implement a rights-based systems approach to food governance would be in the form of a whole-of-government Food Systems Committee housed within the Department of Premier and Cabinet.^{25,39} The Committee would require ministerial and departmental membership spanning the Health, Environment, Agriculture, Regional Development, Planning and Education portfolios, and it would need to build multi-stakeholder partnerships and networks that support participation and representation, including the voices of historically disadvantaged, marginalized and vulnerable groups.



The Committee would be responsible for:

- Planning and overseeing a state-level food system strategy and investment plan,
- Monitoring and measuring the performance of the Victorian food system (see also [Leverage Point 3: Food Systems Monitoring](#))
- Advising and making recommendations to the government on food policy issues,
- Fostering better communication among all food system actors,
- Assisting Victorians in understanding the food system and encouraging their involvement in food policy setting, particularly at a local level,
- Educating committee members about each other's roles and perspectives,
- Facilitating research on food systems.⁴⁰



Case Study: The Massachusetts Food Policy Council

Instituting a Whole-of-government Food Systems Governance Model

Established in 2010 through state legislation, the Massachusetts Food Policy Council (the Council) *“works to increase farming and sales of Massachusetts grown foods and support programs to bring healthy foods to everyone in the state”*.⁴¹ Council membership includes senior officials drawn from departments in state government, including the Agricultural Resources, Housing and Economic Development, Public Health, Environmental Protection, Education, and Transitional Assistance. In addition, there are legislative members (two senators and two representatives) and an array of food system representatives (e.g., farmer, food processor, academia) appointed by the Governor. Council meetings are open to the public.

The remit of the Council includes:

- Increasing production, sale and consumption of Massachusetts-grown foods,
- Developing and promoting programs that bring healthy Massachusetts-grown foods to Massachusetts residents through various programs such as:
 - Targeted state subsidies,
 - Increased state purchasing of local food for school and summer meals and other child and adult care programs,
 - Direct market subsidies to vulnerable groups,
- Increasing institutional purchases of Massachusetts-grown foods and other programs to make access to healthy Massachusetts products affordable,
- Increasing access to healthy Massachusetts-grown foods in communities with disproportionate burdens of obesity and chronic diseases,
- Protecting the land and water resources needed for sustainable local food production,
- Training, retaining and recruiting farmers to ensure the continued economic viability of local food production, processing and distribution.

In 2013, the Council began creating a plan for the state's food system and launched the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan two years later. The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative (the Collaborative) was later established to promote, monitor, and facilitate the Plan's implementation.

Membership of the Collaborative includes broad participation of food system stakeholders from across the state. The Collaborative auspices various projects, including convening a network of more than 20 local food policy groups spread throughout the state to strengthen connections, share best practices, and provide education, such as conducting a community food system assessment. Other projects include advocacy for adequate funding of the state's Healthy Incentives Program, food waste reduction, various working groups, and toolkit development. An amalgamation of philanthropic organisations financially supports the Collaborative.



Leverage Point 3: Food Systems Monitoring

Advance better food systems strategy and policy design by establishing a comprehensive performance measurement and monitoring framework in Victoria's State of the Environment Report.

There is currently little integrated monitoring or reporting of food system impacts beyond productivity measures, limiting policymakers' ability to consider what trade-offs are being made and identify and prioritise actions to drive food system transformation for a prosperous future. We need to evaluate our food system's performance in terms of its capacity to affirm the right to food for all Victorians, including its broader environmental, social and health impacts, and formalise regular, comprehensive food systems performance monitoring to facilitate coherent policy responses.

For a long time, the performance of our food system has been measured on a yield per hectare productivity metric, aligned with the idea that its purpose is to supply enough food to stave off hunger and meet human energy needs. However, this simplistic measure fails to 'measure what matters' – whether our food system fulfils its actual purpose, which means doing so equitably, in a way that promotes health and without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs when their time comes.⁴²

The external effects (externalities) of our food system on the environment and our communities are, for all intents, invisible, not accounted for (internalised) in the price paid and current assessments of performance. Looking at the environment as an example, our food system is the single most significant driver of habitat destruction, biodiversity loss, and catastrophic disruption to carbon, water, and nitrogen cycles. Yet while these externalities remain hidden, this continued 'invisibility of nature' drives a vicious cycle without a proportionate systemic response to counteract it.⁴³

If we do not measure the actual impacts of the food system, in broader terms than productivity, then 'what matters' will continue to go unaccounted for in policy decisions that shape our food system and our future. True cost accounting is an economic assessment model that looks beyond the visible financial gains to the 'hidden costs' of food systems and brings them into focus so we can properly account for them. The concept is akin to a 'food systems balance sheet', which integrates and openly manages the trade-offs on the pathway to food systems transformation.⁴⁴

Globally, many examples of food system balance sheets have been developed to shed light on the complex dynamics of food systems.⁴⁵ The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity AgriFood Evaluation Framework is one example and included as a case study. These sustainability frameworks can inform the development of a holistic food systems performance monitoring program, which the government could build into existing data collection and reporting mechanisms.

The Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Act 2003 includes a statutory requirement for the Commissioner to “prepare and submit to the Minister a periodical Report on the State of the Environment of Victoria prepared at intervals not exceeding 5 years”.⁴⁶ While the Victoria’s State of Environment (SoE) report includes a broad set of 170 indicators, many of which relate to food systems, the reporting is currently not organised in such a way to draw out the interconnectedness between our food system, our natural environment and our communities. For example, the framework for the 2018 SoE report includes chapters on the state of our natural systems, including air, water, land, biodiversity, and the impacts of climate change. It also has chapters with assessments on two critical social-environmental systems – transport and energy. However, a ‘report card’ of our other primary social-environmental system – food, is notably absent.⁴⁷

The SoE report has begun transitioning to a new framework that enables progress reporting against the SDGs (the first state government to do so).⁴⁷ In recognising that transforming food systems is integral to achieving the SDGs, the SoE report provides an avenue to address this shortfall in food systems performance monitoring. Moreover, the statutory obligations of the SoE report give a direct mechanism for ministerial influence and open a pivotal window of opportunity to identify and drive priority actions to transform our food system and generate improved social, environmental, health and economic outcomes.





Case Study: The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity Framework for AgriFood

Adopting a Systems Approach to Measuring and Monitoring Food System Performance

The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) is an initiative hosted by the United Nations Environment Programme.⁴⁸ Inspired by the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change, which revealed the economic inconsistency of inaction with regard to climate change, Environments Ministers from the governments of the G8+5 countries agreed to address the economic invisibility of nature.⁴⁹ TEEB emerged from this decision.

The 'TEEBAgriFood Evaluation Framework' (the Framework) supports a holistic assessment of food system performance by incorporating its most significant externalities across environmental, economic, health, and social dimensions. The Framework contrasts to the conventional, compartmentalized approach to evaluating isolated aspects of the food system, for instance, considering only the retail sector or economic metrics. Instead, it draws attention to how the food system elements interact to form (and reproduce through ongoing feedback loops) the system as a whole and the outcomes it generates.

The Framework (Figure 3) includes four elements – stocks, flows, outcomes, and impacts. Stocks comprise the four capitals (natural, produced, human, and social) that form the basis of the food system – the essential 'wealth' or goods drawn upon to produce and circulate food to people. The stocks underpin a variety of flows, which can be materials or information. Income, value added to the economy and food outputs are the most apparent material drivers/flows of the food system. However, there are also 'intermediate' goods like purchased agricultural inputs (labour, water, energy, agrochemicals etc.), and ecosystem services (pollination, nutrient cycling etc.). Residual material flows, including pollution (GHGs, fertilizer run-off, food loss and waste, etc.), are drivers of some of the most severe outcomes incompatible with our food system's sustainability, and these must be measured.⁵⁰ The patterns and dynamics of the stocks and flows produce outcomes and impacts that regenerate or degenerate the stocks and produce positive or negative externalities. Of crucial importance is that outcomes and impacts are not end states but parts of continuous processes that loop back into the system as feedback.

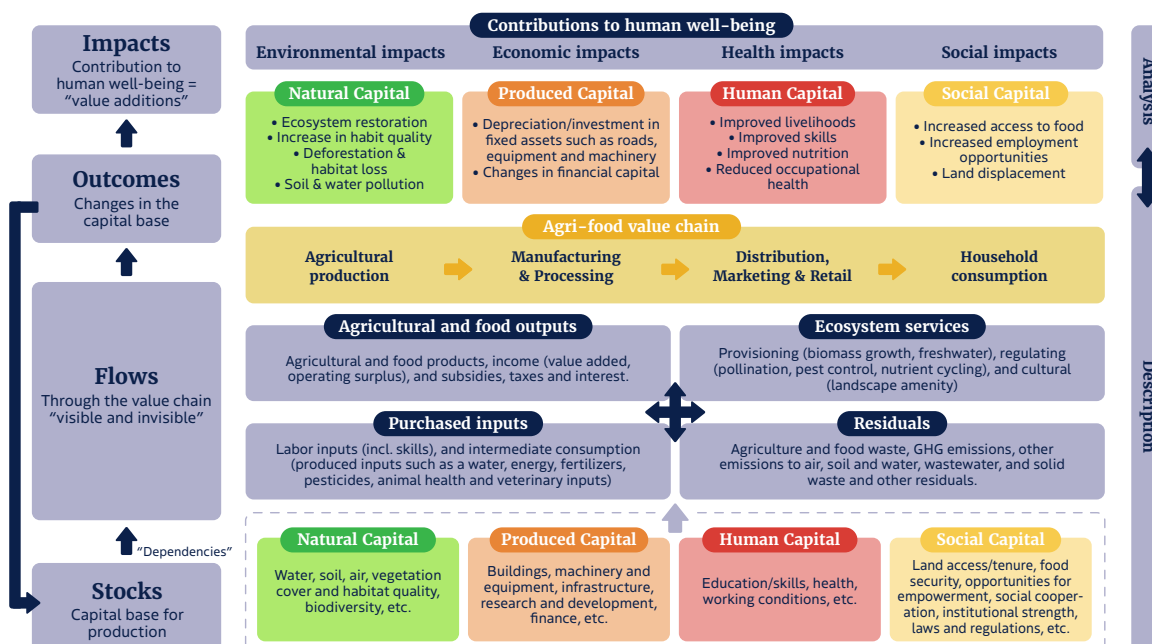


Figure 3. TEEB AgriFood Evaluation Framework⁵⁰

The Framework aims to understand the extent of the food system's externalities and promote a decision-making environment where the beneficial outcomes and impacts flourish, and the adverse outcomes and impacts diminish.



Leverage Point 4: Agroecological Food Production

Support the transition to regenerative farming practices to enhance ecological function and build resilience by proactively supporting and resourcing agroecological solutions.

Over many years, driven by the need to achieve economies of scale (i.e., “get big or get out”), there has been an ongoing restructuring of our farming landscapes towards increasing consolidation, concentration and specialisation. These tendencies have come at the expense of many adverse environmental, social and health outcomes, including (but are not limited to) water scarcity, soil erosion and degradation, habitat destruction and biodiversity loss and the homogenisation of diets. We need to support the growing number of Victorian farmers willing to transition to agroecological practices through proactive investment and capacity building.

While the intensive production methods of industrial agriculture are widely acknowledged as being unsustainable, the approach taken to date to deal with these problems has centred on developing technologies to make industrial agriculture ‘work better’ and enable its continued expansion. However, through a systems lens, it is clear this response does not address the underlying structural arrangements and processes that give rise to these problems in the first place. Instead, we need to move beyond iterative tweaking of the industrial model and confront systemic issues with a truly integrated response.

An agroecological model offers a genuine alternative that orientates around producing diverse, nutritious foods, regenerating ecosystem processes (rather than running them down) and enhancing farmer livelihoods. A growing international community, including the Food and Agriculture Organisation and the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, recognise the transformative role of agroecology^{W,51-55}

Agroecological practices are attuned to local contexts and draw heavily on local and Indigenous knowledge and insights from ecological science. In other words, there is no definitive list of ‘things to do’. However, in general, agroecological practices promote biodiversity and renew soil fertility through intercropping, crop rotation, mixed crop and livestock systems, and composting, and by stimulating interactions between different plants, insects, and birds to manage pests. Working sensitively to the unique, local ecosystems (agroecosystems) minimizes or avoids reliance on costly, scarce or damaging inputs such as pesticides and fertilizers. As a result of a systems approach, multiple benefits are simultaneously realised. These include more diverse and resilient agroecosystems that conserve water, build soil health, restore habitats, promote biodiversity and reinvigorate food economies across rural, peri-urban, and urban communities through job creation.

^W We recognise that agroecology is framed in different ways and there are iterations that extend beyond farming practices to agroecology as an alternative paradigm for food systems in a fuller sense. While it is used here in a discussion of production systems, the principles of an agroecological shift in food and farming, including community-led efforts to re-localise decision-making, are tacit in many of the other leverage points included in this Consensus Statement.

It is essential to recognise that agroecological practices are not a new model of agriculture. Agroecology is as old as agriculture itself – rooted in the traditional, place-based knowledge systems and cultures of Indigenous peoples.⁵⁶ Before colonisation, Aboriginal peoples were farming agroecologically across Australia, perhaps for millennia.^{57,58} Acknowledging the past, ongoing and future contributions that Indigenous lifeways should make to transitioning to a regenerative food system is an integral part of our collective journey of reconciliation.

Victoria is fortunate to be home to some fledgling efforts to diffuse agroecological production systems. For example, a draft agroecology strategy is currently in development by the Mornington Peninsula Shire Council.⁵⁹ In addition, many farmers across the state and Australia more broadly are already experimenting with alternative agroecological methods; however, they are not yet strongly connected to the food system at multiple scales.⁵⁷

Much more needs to be done by the State Government to support these incumbent farmers and new entrants who aspire to farm agroecologically but are hindered for various systemic reasons. Opportunities for the Victorian Government to play an enabling role in scaling agroecology include (but are not limited to):

- Rebuilding a robust social welfare base for farmers that will maintain their livelihoods while transitioning to agroecological practices (e.g., transition loans or grants),
- Ensuring secure, long-term, affordable and equitable access to land and infrastructure for agroecological communities of practice, including safeguarding public land for growing (see also [Leverage Point 9: Community Food Systems Planning](#)),
- Making agroecology central to research, education and extension, including building capacity via investment in learning platforms and knowledge co-creation and exchange (especially horizontally between farmers (e.g., mentorship), and between farmers and their communities,
- Supporting the emergence and growth of networks that strengthen agroecological communities of practice,
- Providing access to local and regional markets (see also [Leverage Point 5: Local Food Infrastructure](#) and [Leverage Point 6: Public Sector Food Procurement and Retail](#)).
- Improving the collection and recovery of food and garden organics for reprocessing into composts and organic fertilisers for farms and investing in infrastructure for farmers to produce their own organic fertilisers or soil conditioners by recycling nutrients on farms.^{57,60-62}





Case Study: RegenWA (Regenerative Agriculture in Western Australia)

Supporting the Emergence and Growth of Agroecological Communities of Practice

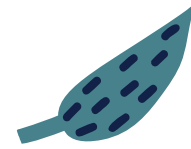
Established in 2018, [RegenWA](#) is the leading network of more than 1,200 West Australian farmers and industry stakeholders who are identifying, implementing and sharing sustainable land management practices. RegenWA emerged from recognising the need to support and encourage farmers who are willing and interested in breaking away from conventional farming and trialling regenerative farming practices that may prove to be more sustainable (financially, socially and environmentally).

RegenWA's main objectives are to:

1. Facilitate a peer-to-peer support and learning network between farmers who are willing to investigate, share and demonstrate leading sustainability practices,
2. Support collaborative and independent research to evaluate the applicability of these leading production systems, practices and technologies,
3. Identify mechanisms that enable farmers to demonstrate their sustainability credentials to consumers who want to make more informed purchasing decisions.

RegenWA is supported by funding from the Western Australian Government's state natural resource management (NRM) program and managed by Perth NRM. It is guided by a steering committee of 11 members who bring a wide range of skills in farming, land management, business and marketing and health education.





Leverage Point 5: Local Food Infrastructure

Strengthen local and regional food systems by creating a Local Food Investment Fund to grow capacity, improve coordination and drive efficiencies in local food infrastructure.

The same logic of economies of scale that generate trends of concentration and consolidation in food production are echoed in the large-scale collection, processing and distribution infrastructure that moves food from producers to communities. To support the transition to agroecological farming practices will necessitate the development of local and regional food networks that move the food from these relatively smaller operations into our communities. We need to enhance local and regional food systems by investing in this critical infrastructure.

The changes in farming practices mentioned earlier (see also [Leverage Point 4: Agroecological Food Production](#)) are contingent on shortening the distance between growers and eaters by developing local and regional food systems. Re-localisation provides markets for farmers in transition and means that a more significant proportion of revenues are retained (particularly by the farmer) to circulate in the local economy and deliver greater prosperity for communities. For example, a UK study compared the multiplier effects of shopping for fresh produce in a supermarket and from a local organic box scheme, finding that every £10 spent with the box scheme resulted in total spending of £25 in the local area, compared with just £14 when the same amount was spent at the supermarket.⁶³

Beyond economic development, stimulating local food systems can deliver multiple environmental benefits beyond the farm gate, including cutting carbon footprint through lower production and transport-related GHGs and producing less waste. Local food systems also reconnect communities with eating seasonal, diverse diets and shift agency to communities, especially and importantly, to vulnerable and marginalised groups, including women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, migrant workers and those on low incomes. This creates opportunities for communities to participate to a greater degree in decisions about what foods to grow and eat, how to do so, how they are processed and distributed – all foundational ideas embedded in a rights-based approach.⁶⁴

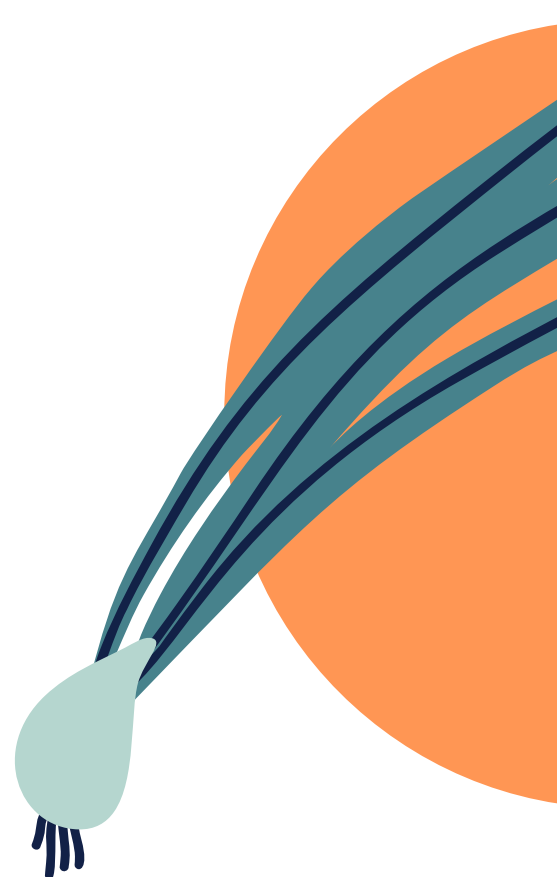
There are many different ways of organising local and regional food systems. Food hubs are one example that seeks to directly connect small and medium-size producers with individuals and businesses in their local communities, which they would have difficulty accessing due to their relatively small production scale (Figure 4). Food hubs are a common model used worldwide but are only beginning to gain traction in Australia. Victoria, for example, is already home to several food hubs, including Baw Baw, CERES and Melbourne.

The nature of food hubs can vary in that they can operate on different scales and fulfil various functions. For instance, regional food hubs increase market access for local and regional producers by offering a combination of production, distribution and marketing services that allow producers to gain entry into new and additional markets that would be difficult or impossible to access independently.⁶⁵ Regional food hubs can complement and add considerable value to existing food distribution arrangements. For example, providing a single point of purchase for consistent and reliable supplies of source-identified products can make it easier for small and medium-size farms to serve public sector procurement contracts (see also [Leverage Point 6: Public Sector Food Procurement and Retail](#)).⁶⁵ As most food hubs are firmly rooted in their community, they also often carry out several additional services, including improving access to healthy food by establishing delivery mechanisms to underserved areas, building food literacy by providing nutrition and cooking education, and increasing the awareness of the benefits of buying local food.⁶⁵



Figure 4. Food Hub

For food hubs or other enterprises that aggregate and distribute local food, limited funds can be a barrier to entry, growth beyond the start-up phase and long-term sustainability. To realise the many benefits of local food systems and build long-term, generalised resilience into a secure and nourishing food supply will require investment.⁶⁶ The Victorian Government should play a crucial role here by investing in essential local food infrastructure for markets, storage, processing and other necessary food system components (e.g., cooperative small scale mobile abattoirs) to support the decentralisation of production and distribution networks.





Case Study: The US Food Hub Experience

Supporting the Pollination of Food Hubs in the US through Increased Government Recognition of their Value and Sustained Investment in their Infrastructure

In 2009, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), under the Obama administration, established the “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” Initiative to strengthen connections between farmers and communities by developing local and regional food systems.⁶⁷ The project task force identified early on that small and medium-size producers lacked critical infrastructures, such as warehousing and vehicles, and services, that if made available, would allow them to take advantage of the growing demand for local and regional food in larger volume markets, such as public sector procurers including schools and hospitals.⁶⁷

The USDA partnered with the Wallace Center (a non-profit organisation working to transform the food system) to create the National Food Hub Collaboration, which brought together practitioners and researchers to pilot, test and share successful models of values-based food systems. Although the project did not have a budget, the Collaboration highlighted existing, sometimes overlooked, funding available to build local and regional food systems.

Later on, the 2014 Farm Bill introduced specific funding for the Local Food Promotion Program – a \$150 million^x investment over five years allocated for farmers markets and projects that develop, coordinate and expand local and regional food enterprises like food hubs. Grants are available for planning stages (\$5,000 to \$25,000), such as conducting feasibility studies, market research, accessing training or technical assistance, or expanding infrastructure (\$25,000 to \$100,000).⁶⁸⁻⁷⁰

As a result of the increased recognition of the value (social, economic, and environmental) of local and regional food systems and investment in them, the food hub model has expanded rapidly in the US. According to the USDA Food Hub Directory, there are over 200 food hubs across the US, compared with fewer than 50 in 2000.⁷¹ The National Food Hub Survey in 2019 also demonstrates how food hubs have become a critical connecting point to enhance the flow of locally produced healthy food (particularly fresh produce, eggs, meat, and poultry) into the communities they serve, including vulnerable groups.⁷² Notable features of the US food hub landscape include:

- Food hubs connect from three to 190 producers per hub, with an average of 48 producers,
- 39% of hubs have a primarily wholesale business model; 32% have a hybrid model of both wholesale and direct to consumer, and 22% are primarily direct to consumer,
- 56 food hubs spent more than \$31.8 million on purchases from small and medium-sized farms,
- 74 food hubs reported more than \$174 million in combined revenue from product sales, with an average revenue of \$2.4 million per hub,
- More than half of food hubs are located in low income, low access communities – emphasising their role in supporting food security in vulnerable groups,
- Over half of food hub management positions are held by women, and 14% by people of colour,
- The proportion of food hubs over five years old has increased since 2013, and established hubs employ more people – demonstrating the maturity of the sector,
- 44% of food hubs received federal government funding and 22% state government funding.

^x All dollar amounts in this case study are USD.



Leverage Point 6: Public Sector Food Procurement and Retail

Transition all public sector food procurement and retail to preference healthy and sustainably produced food sourced locally or regionally by developing compulsory social and ethical food procurement and retail standards and implementation assistance.

Every day vast quantities of foods and beverages are served and sold in public settings across Victoria, from schools, tertiary institutions and healthcare services to food relief and emergencies, representing an extensive population reach, including vulnerable groups. While the Victorian Government has taken some steps to prioritise fresh, healthy and locally sourced food in some settings, there remains significant scope to enhance this work by mandating, monitoring and enforcing more integrated standards, which include sourcing from Victorian farmers using or transitioning to agroecological practices via local and regional food networks.

The Victorian Government's [Healthy Choices framework](#) aims to increase the procurement and provision of healthy foods and drinks in public facilities, including public hospitals and health services, sport and recreation centres, workplaces and parks, tertiary institutions and emergency food relief (the latter is under development - see also [Leverage Point 10: Food Relief Models](#)). There is also the voluntary School Canteens and other Food Services Policy introduced in 2006, which applies in school settings (see also [Leverage Point 7: School Food Systems](#)). While Healthy Choices has supported many improvements and exemplary practices in public sector food procurement and provision, these standards are only (recently) mandatory for hospitals and health services.⁷³ Beyond these settings, Healthy Choices is incentivised but not mandated or monitored.

Victoria is uniquely placed in providing government funding for the Healthy Eating Advisory Service, which offers free technical assistance and a range of tools, resources and training opportunities to support settings to supply and promote healthy foods and drinks (through retail, vending and catering). However, given the scale and complexity of the public sector, transformative change is slow, and evaluations to date have shown low compliance with the Healthy Choices framework in some settings.⁷⁴ Moreover, while the primary focus is on improving nutrition, Healthy Choices does not currently include local, regional or agroecological sourcing parameters. For farmers to take on the challenge of diversifying their production and transitioning to agroecological practices and for local food economies (including social enterprises) to grow and strengthen, they need markets - one of which should be the public sector. To cultivate enabling conditions for this to happen will require building the capacity of local and regional food networks (see also [Leverage Point 4: Agroecological Food Production](#) and [Leverage Point 5: Local Food Infrastructure](#)) and working with procurement managers across the public service to map current arrangements and identify opportunities to progressively target procurement from proximate sources.

We need a healthy, regenerative and equitable food procurement and retail policy directive, which prioritises producers using or transitioning to agroecological practices through local and regional food networks and provides a clear signal to the market that the Victorian Government will lead by example and spend taxpayer dollars in a way that provides values for money as well as value for money - by setting the standards, monitoring and enforcement mechanisms and implementation assistance for the purchase, subsidy, provision, distribution, preparation, service and sale of food. In so doing, public sector food procurement and retail represents a significant lever to catalyse the transformation of the food system at large.



Case Study: The Good Food Purchasing Program

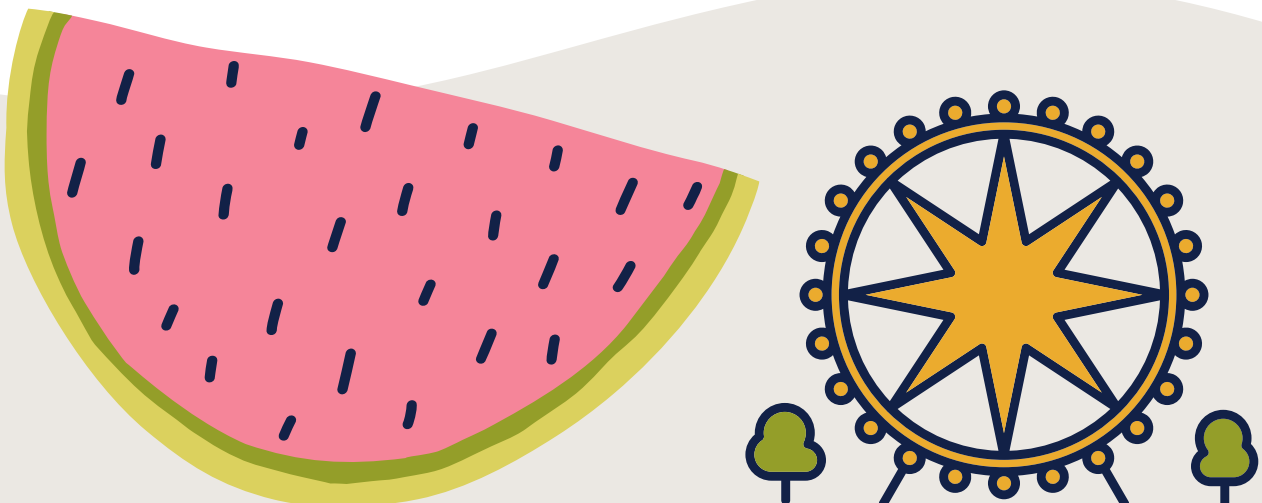
Institutionalising Healthy and Sustainable Public Food Procurement Standards

Established in 2012, the Good Food Purchasing Program (the Program) works to transform the procurement policies of public institutions across America by redirecting their buying power towards five core values - local economies, nutrition, a valued workforce, environmental sustainability and animal welfare.

The Program provides a metric based, flexible framework to guide holistic action, alongside a comprehensive suite of tools, technical support and a rigorous certification system. To date, 12 cities have enrolled in the Program, collectively redirecting billions of taxpayer dollars and transforming local food systems in the process. Example impacts of the inaugural Program in the Los Angeles Unified School District include:

- Redirecting \$17 million^Y to purchase from local growers and manufacturers,
- Creating 220 new, well-paid local food system jobs,
- Shifting the purchase of wheat for approximately 50 million annual servings of bread in-state, with no price change,
- Saving an estimated 19.6 million gallons of water weekly.

The Program is a project of Community Partners – a non-profit organisation that receives financial backing from city governments that adopt the Good Food Standards.



^Y All dollar amounts in this case study are USD.



Leverage Point 7: School Food Systems

Transform Victorian school food systems and enhance food systems literacy by working with our educational community and allocating appropriate resourcing and investment.

The food systems approach underpinning this Consensus Statement is grounded in an appreciation that the behaviour of systems (made visible through particular patterns of food production and provisioning) emerges from the nature of connections within and around those systems. This profoundly holistic, multi-dimensional view is nurtured when we foster ecoliteracy – a sensibility for the interconnectedness of all life. Ecoliteracy is multidisciplinary, and therefore it makes sense that sustainability enriches our children's core education as a cross-curriculum priority within the Australian Curriculum. In the context of this ecological learning, food is the rarest of tools that can connect children to themselves, each other and the Earth. Consequently, school food systems are a unique leverage point to catalyse a reorganisation of food systems at large, both by shaping the world view, systems sensibility and food practices of future generations and by changing the food made available in schools. We need to work with our educational community to understand how to best stimulate action to transform school food systems and resource and invest accordingly.

Schools are a unique connecting point in communities - where families live, work, and play together and where, as they learn and grow, children form lasting connections with the world around them. Food is the essence of so many of these connections, from sharing meals and conversation in the company of friends at recess, to learning how food grows in relation to natural cycles and where the food we eat comes from. Intentional or not, these connections are teachable moments woven throughout school life, offering unrivalled opportunities to engage the next generation with food in positive ways in their minds, bodies and hearts. There are also the connections made when changing the food bought and brought into schools, including 1. What food is purchased (such as local, diverse, healthy and culturally appropriate), 2. From whom (for example, small-scale family farms and other disadvantaged producers), and 3. From what type of production systems (for instance, those that lean more towards industrial practices versus agroecological) which can lead to ripple effects beyond the school itself into homes, communities and the broader food economy (see also [Leverage Point 6: Public Sector Food Procurement and Retail](#)).⁷⁵

There is considerable scope to strengthen school food systems in Victoria and expand the integration of food into school life as a way to understand and read the world, and in so doing, build an appreciation for the importance of food in personal, community and ecological health.⁷⁶ The Victorian Curriculum Foundation through to Year 10 pares back food literacy, relegating it to a brief and disjointed appearance in only two of eight learning areas (Health and Physical Education and Design and Technologies).⁷⁷ The lack of value placed on food literacy as a core dimension of learning means that while children may have reasonable food and nutrition knowledge levels, they lack the practical skills, understanding and deeper connections (i.e., food systems literacy) that is only fostered through direct participation in food practices such as growing, cooking and composting.

Furthermore, all Australian states and territories have voluntary school food nutrition policies; however, adherence is variable and often poor, and monitoring and enforcement mechanisms are lacking. In Victoria, the State Government first introduced voluntary school food guidelines in 2006, with the School Canteens and other Food Services Policy.⁷⁸ Since the Policy's inception, research over the past 15 years has consistently shown poor adherence, and the latest survey in 2019 of 60 randomly selected primary schools showed none were compliant with the Policy.⁷⁸⁻⁸¹

In recognition of the value in adopting a systems approach to transforming food in schools, the Food and Agriculture Organisation recently published the School Food and Nutrition Framework (Figure 5).⁸² The Framework expands beyond what is generally regarded as a whole-school approach to school food – the curriculum and food environment - to broaden and include linkages across four synergistic areas of 1. Food environment, 2. Food education, 3. Food procurement and 4. An enabling institutional and policy context. While this Framework is relatively new, the approach it advocates underpins many existing transformational school food programs worldwide.



Figure 5. FAO School Food and Nutrition Framework⁸²

Somewhat aligned with this systems approach to school food, some schools in Victoria already invest in developing and maintaining bespoke food literacy resources and voluntary programs (e.g., school kitchen gardens) or access and adapt shelf-ready learning materials for their classrooms and enforce a school food policy. However, though program evaluations show positive outcomes for improving food literacy, this approach can be burdensome to teachers by significantly impinging on their time and capacity.⁸³ It is also piecemeal, relying heavily on teachers' engagement with food literacy and likely further amplifies inequalities among schools and student health and learning outcomes. There is a significant gap and opportunity for the State Government to work with our educational community to strengthen school food systems in Victoria, including remaking connections to the local and regional food economies and nurturing the next generation of ecologically-minded farmers, food producers and food citizens.



Case Study: California Food for California Kids

Transitioning School Food Systems and Building Food Literacy

Established in 2010, the [California Food for California Kids](#) Initiative (the Initiative) from the Center for Ecoliteracy builds the capacity and commitment of public school districts to transition to school food systems that provide all students with fresh, locally-grown food and food literacy education to build ecological understanding. The Initiative offers various programs, resources and inspiration for school food service professionals, educators and school communities. It operates at multiple levels of scale, including a statewide network, regional clusters of school districts and partner organisations, and school district-level programs.²

An example school program is California Thursdays, where districts serve fresh, local ingredients one day a week and gradually transition their food service from that baseline. The success of this program has inspired other US states to launch similar programs, including Minnesota, Nebraska and New York.⁸⁴

The Center for Ecoliteracy supports the Initiative's statewide network of 89 school districts across 33 counties (over 2 million students) with guiding strategies, coordinated activities, data collection and reporting and communications. Galvanised by the work of the Center for Ecoliteracy on school food systems, in June 2021, California became the first state in the US to permanently adopt free school meals for all kindergarten to grade 12 students to help address child food insecurity, eliminate stigma and support academic attainment.⁸⁵

² School food systems look different in Australia to many other upper-income countries. Elsewhere and including in California, public schools often have catering services that routinely provide cooked meals to students in a semi-formal seated cafeteria arrangement. The Australian approach is more pared back. Children eat food in their classrooms or, weather permitting, outside, and the food provided by schools mainly acts as an adjunct to lunchbox food that children bring from home. If provided, school food is usually in the form of an onsite 'tuckshop' canteen or an offsite food delivery service. Indeed, many schools may not even have a food service. Despite these differences in operating models, there are still learnings that can be taken from the approaches taken by California Food for California Kids and other transformational school food models worldwide to apply to the Victorian context.



Leverage Point 8: Community Food System Strategies

Require, empower and resource local councils to lead the participatory development of community food system strategies by amending the Public Health and Well-being Act 2008.

Community food systems are well-recognised as a powerful tool to address multiple aspects of social well-being, including improving diets, promoting environmental stewardship and contributing to local economic development.⁸⁶ Local councils are well-placed to play a central role in invigorating local food systems, particularly by facilitating and ensuring participation by community members. However, holistic food system planning processes and joined-up food policies are not currently within their remit. We need to empower our local councils to work with their communities to determine what steps they can take to improve their food systems at a local level.

Increasing healthy eating is one of the four focus areas in [Victoria's Public Health and Well-being Plan 2019-2023](#), which local councils must regard when preparing their Municipal Public Health and Well-being Plans (Municipal Plans). Noting that personal factors such as food literacy, taste preferences and momentary hunger do not solely determine people's choices around what to eat - the context in which choices are made profoundly shapes behaviour. The food system context includes the physical, economic, political, social and cultural arrangements in which foods are made available. This context can vary, for instance, in terms of the kinds of food available, their cost and distribution including, the number, type, location and accessibility (including operating hours and location) of food vendors (which may also be producers), as well as advertising (see also [Leverage Point 9: Community Food Systems Planning](#)).⁸⁷ Local actions to improve dietary patterns can be hampered unless these systemic influences are considered and addressed.

We already have a sense of what can be achieved when local councils are empowered and resourced to develop place-based food system strategies that meet the particular needs of their communities.⁸⁸ From 2005-10, VicHealth's Food for All initiative catalysed a range of strategic food systems programs across selected Victorian councils. Various initiatives flowed from this work, including the flagship Healthy Together Victoria from 2010-16 and the Department of Health and Human Services' [Healthy Food Connect model](#). Funding for these initiatives has since ended; however, several councils have recognised the benefits of an integrated and localised food system approach and continued without financial or resource assistance from the state government or statutory agencies. Eleven Victorian councils currently have food system strategies, and examples of this exemplary work in Greater Bendigo and the North East are included as case studies.⁸⁸

Developing community food systems strategies with residents in a participatory manner will ensure that actions proposed to promote healthy eating in municipal plans align with the current evidence base of a systems approach to promoting health. Furthermore, there is a precedent for amending the Public Health and Well-being Act, suggesting this would be a suitable mechanism to create the right conditions for local-level efforts to transform community food systems. In 2008, following Recommendation 94 of the Royal Commission in Preventing Family Violence, an amendment was made to require councils in their Municipal Plans to specify measures to prevent family violence and to respond to the needs of victims of family violence.





Case Study: City of Greater Bendigo Food System Strategy 2020–2030

Developing a Place-based Food Systems Strategy: City of Greater Bendigo

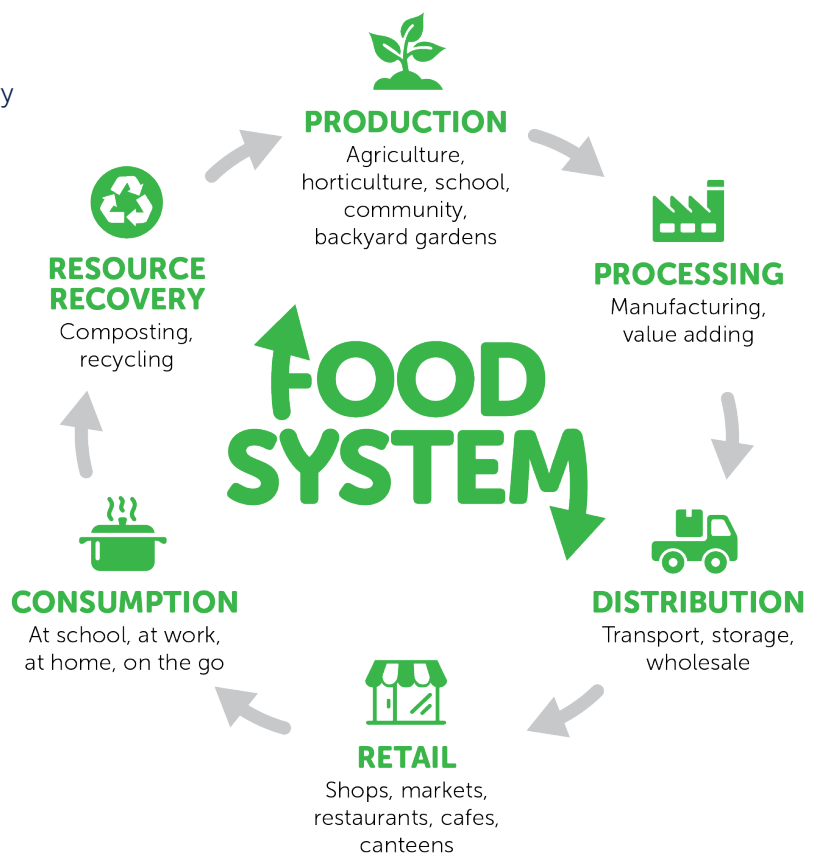
The [Greater Bendigo Food System Strategy 2020-2030](#) (the Bendigo Strategy) provides strategic direction to guide the City of Greater Bendigo, partner organisations and groups to strengthen and support Greater Bendigo’s regional food system over ten years (Figure 6).⁸⁹ The Bendigo Strategy’s vision is that “*Greater Bendigo’s food system is healthy, equitable and sustainable and supports the local economy, culture, and health and well-being of our communities*” and underpinned by the following objectives:

1. Enable communities to access safe, affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate foods and drinks
2. Strengthen and support a sustainable local food economy that enables the growth, production and sale of healthy food locally
3. Support local food growing and producing, sourcing, cooking and sharing knowledge, skills and culture
4. Reduce and divert food waste from landfill

The Bendigo Strategy’s Action Plan identifies a raft of initiatives that work towards the four strategic objectives and commits to annual reporting to monitor progress against pre-agreed success measures. Work in the Strategy’s first year included fundraising towards a new community food hub, establishing the Bendigo Food Pantry with an online ordering system, mapping water fountains in the region to promote public awareness and launching the YouFoods project with Bendigo Foodshare to tackle youth food insecurity.

The Bendigo Strategy was developed using a participatory approach with input from an external expert advisory group and engagement with more than 1,000 community members. The Strategy utilises a Collective Impact framework, which recognises that multiple entities working collaboratively towards a shared vision maximises efforts.

Figure 6. ►
City of Greater Bendigo Food System Strategy⁸⁹





Case Study: North East Local Food Strategy 2018–2022

Developing a Translocal Food Systems Strategy for Multiple Local Government Areas

Before 2018, much work was being done across the North East Victoria region to address food system issues at the level of local councils. However, it was becoming clear to agencies working in the region that many local food system issues crossed local government area boundaries and required a regional approach. In response to this identified need, the North East Local Food Strategy (the North East Strategy) was developed by health, local government, agriculture, tourism and community partners through a collaborative, cross-sector approach.⁹⁰

The North East Strategy “aims to contribute towards a strong, sustainable and equitable food system in North East Victoria” by driving action to achieve each of the five Aspirational Goals:

1. North East Victoria has a coordinated approach and collective voice that drives a strong local food system,
2. North East Victoria has a thriving, diverse and resilient agricultural sector, where sustainable land management practices ensure natural resources are protected and enhanced,
3. North East Victoria has strong short food supply chains where producers have access to logistics appropriate to their scale of operation at all stages of the supply chain,
4. All community members have access to fresh local produce, understand the benefits of a strong local food system and make informed and healthy choices,
5. Waste is minimised through closed-loop food redistribution systems and initiatives that reduce the use of single-use packaging and support recycling.

While the lack of designated funding and COVID-19 have hampered the delivery of the North East Strategy, the following impacts have nevertheless been achieved:

- Formation of a multi-agency, cross-sector North East Local Food Strategy Action Group to progress the strategy,
- Development and adoption of a new local food policy developed by Indigo Shire Council, and incorporation of food into other local council strategies and planning,
- Delivery of capacity building events to increase skills in sustainable agricultural methods,
- Provision of support to community and school initiatives that enhance food literacy, for example, providing spaces to grow food and home wicking beds, organizing food swaps, and supporting community or school gardens,
- Securement of funds to:
 - Gather community input into two projects - Short Food Supply Chains: Opportunities and Challenges for Farmers in North East Victoria and The Open Road Project,
 - Update the [Mountain to Murray Local Produce Guide](#) and fresh food access guides for Indigo and Alpine Shires,
 - Establish the Acres and Acres Co-operative.



Leverage Point 9: Community Food Systems Planning

Prioritise and promote healthy community food systems by reforming Victorian Planning Provisions legislation to explicitly state the promotion of health, alongside economic, environmental and social well-being considerations.

Our neighbourhoods play a significant role in ensuring our health and well-being in many ways, including shaping the relative exposure to healthy and unhealthy foods. Under current Victorian planning legislation, the population health impacts of planning applications are not sufficiently considered when authorities weigh up policy objectives and priorities. This means that planning decisions can run counter to what would be in the best interest of public health with harmful consequences. We need an integrated approach to planning that recognises the importance of community health and the transformative potential of local food systems.

Affirming the right to food is directly related to planning for food production and provisioning. Land use planning (including zoning bylaws) determine the permitted and preferred use of available land within a jurisdiction and, in so doing, can promote healthier community food systems. For example, planning provisions can protect land from urban sprawl and promote its use for localised food production (urban and peri-urban agriculture), improve access and proximity to sources of healthy and fresh food (grown and sold) so that it is more convenient, and they can limit the density and location of fast-food outlets and drive-throughs. Differential rates could also, for example, be used to preference sustainable farming practices. Integrated approaches that encourage healthy foods and discourage unhealthy foods in communities are essential to shaping health-promoting food systems where people live, learn, work and play.

Unfortunately, community health is neither a policy nor objective under current Victorian planning laws. It is no surprise then that research shows that in population growth areas in Victoria, unhealthy food outlets (including fast-food outlets, takeaways and convenience stores) have increased and rapidly outpaced the expansion of healthy food outlets to reach a ratio as high as 9:1. This ratio has nearly doubled from 2008-2016.⁹¹

Continuing with fast-food outlets as an example, in 2013, the Yarra Ranges Council refused planning permission for a new McDonald's outlet in Tecoma.⁹² The council's decision was consistent with community sentiment, having received 1,300 objections from residents on the grounds that included health implications. However, the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) overturned the local council's decision, resulting in a prolonged and disruptive community activism campaign at the site. Despite the apparent public dissatisfaction with this outcome, similar planning decisions have been made around Victoria.⁹²

There has long been a broad consensus that significant reforms are needed to align planning policy with public health goals. In 2012, the Inquiry into Environmental Design and Public Health in Victoria received several submissions for the State Planning Policy Framework to comprehensively address health and well-being. A recommendation made by the Inquiry was that "the Victorian Government amends the State Planning Policy Framework within the Victoria Planning Provisions to include a policy on planning for health and well-being".⁹³ However, almost a decade has passed, and this amendment is yet to be made.

We urgently need to update the objectives of planning law to promote community food systems that support people to lead active lifestyles and enjoy healthy diets. Actions to improve community food systems through planning may involve:

1. Shaping physical access - in terms of the presence, location and nature of food sources within a community – how easily all residents, including low-income and other vulnerable groups, can reach sources of sufficient, healthy, affordable, safe and culturally appropriate food.⁹⁴ Examples include enabling food production by providing equitable access to and land for urban agriculture; encouraging healthy/discouraging unhealthy food retail through zoning, permits and licenses, fiscal measures, business advice and training; facilitating mobility/public transportation.
2. Shaping desirability – this concerns the messaging (advertising, marketing, labelling) around food and the presentation (visibility and attractiveness) of food. An example would be restricting unhealthy food advertising in neighbourhoods.

There is a growing international precedent for planning approaches that take these measures to improve community food systems. Closer to home, planning laws have also been used to reduce exposure to unhealthy food through introducing progressive restrictions on outdoor food advertising (e.g., bus shelters) in Mandurah in Western Australia – showing that progress is possible.⁹⁵

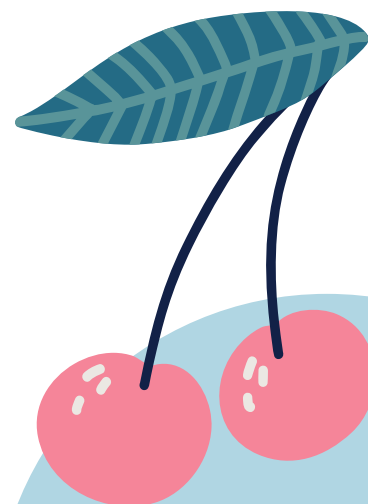


Case Study: National Planning Policy Framework (England)

Integrating Healthy Community Food Systems as a Core Element of Planning Policy

In England, the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) (the Framework) states: “*Planning policies and decisions should aim to achieve healthy, inclusive and safe places which: enable and support healthy lifestyles, especially where this would address identified local health and well-being needs – for example, through the provision of ... access to healthier food*”.^{96 (p.27)} The Framework empowers local government areas (LGAs) to impose controls on the spread of unhealthy food outlets on health grounds.

A recent census found that over a third of LGAs have a policy with health-focused planning criteria.⁹⁷ The most common approach is introducing exclusion zoning (distance and walking time) around places where children and families gather, like schools, parks and leisure facilities, including sports centres and youth clubs.⁹⁷ The second most common approach is through caps that limit the density of takeaway food outlets in retail areas. Research with local government planning and health professionals shows that they feel these policies can effectively regulate fast-food outlets to improve health.⁹⁸





Leverage Point 10: Food Relief Models

Improve dignified access to fresh and healthy food relief by developing a new, coordinated and collaborative approach with the food relief sector.

The reality that thousands of Victorians do not have the means to enjoy a healthy diet or cannot even afford enough food to satisfy hunger demonstrates a systemic failure to uphold the right to adequate food. However, addressing the root causes of this deeply entrenched, wholly unacceptable problem so that handouts become a thing of the past will take time and concerted action (as outlined in leverage points 1 – 9). Right now, the prominence of ultra-processed unhealthy food in the food relief sector has significant health implications for recipients and compounds their risk of long-term health issues, in addition to mental ill-health due to stigma and shame. We need a new, coordinated and collaborative approach to food relief that involves people with lived experiences of food insecurity and provides dignified access to healthy food.

Food insecurity was evident in Victoria before COVID-19 but has become more pronounced through the cascading effects of the pandemic. During the initial COVID-19 restrictions from May to June 2020, the proportion of Victorians reportedly running out of food and unable to buy more increased from 4% to 7%.⁹⁹ In addition, 23% of Victorians reported relying on a restricted range of low-cost unhealthy foods due to running out of money.¹ A follow-up survey in September 2020 found no significant difference in the number of Victorian adults reportedly experiencing food insecurity, highlighting that food insecurity is an entrenched and ongoing issue for substantial numbers of Victorians.¹⁰⁰ Recent cross-sectional research also shows how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities. The risk of experiencing food insecurity has significantly increased among those with a disability, those living in rural areas, those with dependents and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.¹⁰¹ Food insecurity may contribute to poor physical, social and psychological health outcomes among children and adults who experience it, including irreversible adverse effects on cognitive development and growth in young people.^{102,103}

As a direct consequence of rising food insecurity, many Victorians access food relief to meet their basic food needs; however, these models of food provision rely heavily on donated surplus food from the industrial food system. As a result, non-perishable, ultra-processed unhealthy foods are abundant, and there is a distinct shortage of healthy foods such as fresh vegetables and fruits, which exacerbates health issues in vulnerable groups.¹⁰⁴ At least in the relatively short term, before food relief is phased out, there is an opportunity to review models of food relief and reflect on how they can make a positive and valuable contribution to a fair transition towards the food future envisioned.

The food relief sector could become a leverage point for system change if the standards and model to which it operates (the quality and sourcing of the food that is provided) are adjusted, as far as is practicable, in line with the guiding principles for systems change (see [Guiding Principles](#)).¹⁰⁵ This means preferencing fresh and healthy minimally processed and sustainably grown food that is sourced locally or regionally where possible (contract grown under subsidy or charitably funded, if needed and appropriate)—a shift which tax incentives could bolster.¹⁰⁶ There are also opportunities for the food relief sector to do more to support recipients navigating permanent pathways out of food insecurity, which may also contribute to food systems change (e.g., see Community Food Centres Canada case study). Ensuring that Federal and State funding for food relief flows equitably beyond metropolitan to regional and rural food relief agencies should support work on this leverage point.

The Working Group would like to recognise the ongoing work of the Victorian [Food Relief Taskforce](#) that has emerged in parallel to the development of this Consensus Statement. The Food Relief Taskforce provides a crucial mechanism for achieving the approach to food relief advocated for in this leverage point.



Case Study: Nutrition Guidelines for the Food Relief Sector (South Australia)

Maximising the Availability of Healthy Foods to Recipients of Food Relief

Developed in 2019 to support the South Australian Food Relief Charter, the Nutrition Guidelines for Food Relief (Nutrition Guidelines) aim to increase the provision and proportion of healthy foods in the emergency food relief sector. Despite their name, the Nutrition Guidelines are food-based but also go beyond food standards to provide advice on creating a health-promoting food environment, such as using prominent placement, competitive pricing, and increased promotion of 'green' and 'amber' classified foods.

The Nutrition Guidelines also integrate sustainability principles; for instance, they advocate supporting local growers and producers to reduce handling and transport costs and related GHGs and accepting produce with slight physical imperfections to minimize wastage of food that is otherwise safe to eat.

The Nutrition Guidelines are an outcome of the Food Security Project - a joint initiative of the Department for Healthy and Well-being and the Department of Human Services.



Case Study: Community Food Centres Canada

Creating Community Food Centres as Spaces to Advance Community Food Security

Community Food Centres Canada was founded in 2012 to develop and expand the Community Food Centre model across Canada, based on the Stop Community Food Centre (Stop) in Toronto. Stop is located in one of Ontario's lowest-income, most diverse communities and was initially established as a food bank in the mid-1970s.¹⁰⁷ While Stop maintains its emergency food efforts, it now complements this work with a range of capacity- and skills-building programs, including community kitchens and gardens.

Stop's mission is *"to increase access to healthy food in a manner that maintains dignity, builds health and community, and challenges inequality"*. To achieve this mission, Stop adopts an integrated approach whereby it provides a place for community members to come together to grow, cook, and eat food and pursue food systems change to strengthen community food security.

Food anchors the work of Stop, but this means more than 'just' the direct provision of food or experiences to build food literacy. Stop also provides an opportunity for people to connect with social services and entitlements or to others in the community. In this way, food is viewed not only as an end in itself but a means to achieve a broader goal of more empowered, healthier people and communities.

The Stop's strategic objectives are:

- Increase low-income community members' access to healthy food,
- Increase knowledge and skills around healthy food,
- Increase participants' connection to the community by linking them to Stop's programs, mutual support networks, and other community supports,
- Increase community members' knowledge and ability to advocate on food policy and income security,
- Increase the Stop's leadership on food issues and awareness of community food centre model,
- Create an environment at Stop that respects individual dignity and cultural diversity,
- Strengthen Stop's financial and organizational capacity to serve the community.

Following its pioneering work, Stop became recognised as a national leader and after further pilots in other locations, and there are now 13 more Community Food Centres across Canada.

Shifting Approaches to Unlock Transitions



With policymaking processes, it is common practice to start where we are now – to look at the problems that are imminently facing us and find ways to optimise the systems we have to solve them. However, without adjusting the underlying organising principles, gradual changes to established systems will not address the root causes of the multiple converging crises we face. Indeed, what if the way we ordinarily respond to these problems is *part of* these crises?

What could happen then, if instead of jumping into ‘solution mode’, we ask questions around what sort of food future do we want and how would we be in that ‘not yet’ world? From this response emerges all kinds of ideas of how food systems could be otherwise – many of which stem from an awareness of those who already experience that reality. Questions like how do we pollinate an economy grounded in currencies of solidarity, circularity and well-being and ensure that public monies are redirected in line with these principles for vitality and sustainability? How can our communities have more say about and involvement with the food systems where they live and spend their time? And how can we seed this ecological worldview in future generations using food as our tool?

This approach is entirely different to policymaking processes that attempt to lay a step-by-step pathway to a new food future – as if the steppingstones are all available at our fingertips and there is a clear and final destination to navigate to with surety. Rather than engineering fixes, this way of contemplating the ‘not yet’ holds the possibility for a different path of inquiry – a collaborative policymaking approach where we question how to leverage the *enabling conditions* that would unlock a transition towards that healthy, regenerative and equitable future.

In these times of uncertainty, *Towards a Healthy, Regenerative and Equitable Food System in Victoria* is a compass to guide collective action and investment so that the will and creativity of our farmers, food producers and communities can flourish, together.



Glossary

Agroecology	The application of ecological concepts and principles to the design and management of sustainable agroecosystems, and more broadly, the ecology of food systems. In discussions of farming practices, it is used here interchangeably with the notion of regenerative farming.
Healthy Foods	Healthy foods are unprocessed or minimally processed foods from the five food groups in the Australian Dietary Guidelines.
Food Literacy	The ability of an individual to understand food to develop a positive relationship with it and make decisions and enact food practices (e.g., growing, cooking, composting) that support the attainment of personal and environmental health.
Food Security	A situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.
Food Sovereignty	The rights of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.
Leverage Point	Places within a system where a small shift will produce large changes across the whole system.
Lock-in	A key mechanism (a self-reinforcing process) that holds a system in a 'dynamically stable' state.
Food System	The entire range of actors and their interconnected practices and processes involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, eating and disposal of food.
Right to Food	A legal concept which is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement.
Ultra-processed Foods	Formulations of ingredients, mostly of exclusive industrial use, typically created by a series of industrial techniques and processes, in accordance with the NOVA system. Some common ultra-processed foods are carbonated soft drinks; sweet, fatty or salty packaged snacks; confectionery; mass-produced packaged bread and buns, biscuits, pastries, cakes and cake mixes; margarine and other spreads; sweetened breakfast cereals and fruit yoghurt and energy drinks; pre-prepared meat, cheese, pasta and pizza dishes; poultry and fish 'nuggets' and 'sticks'; sausages, burgers, hot dogs and other reconstituted meat products; powdered and packaged instant soups, noodles and desserts; infant formula.
Transition	The long-term process of change from one 'dynamically stable' system to another. Transitions involve complex, co-evolutionary reconfigurations of technology, policy, infrastructure, knowledge and socio-cultural practices.

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Appendix 1: Approach to the Development of the Consensus Statement

1. **Agree on a clear purpose and course of action**

Recognising the need to prioritise action towards long-term food security and food equity, the Working Group agreed to develop the Consensus Statement; a vision to strengthen and improve Victoria's food system and priority areas of action to inform Victorian State and Local government policy.

2. **Generate a draft vision, guiding principles and priority areas for policy and action**

All members of the Working Group put forward their vision for our food system and brainstormed ideas for policy options. These were collated and condensed to generate a draft overarching vision, guiding principles and priority areas for policy and action.

3. **Achieve consensus**

The draft of the overarching vision, guiding principles and priority areas for policy and action was shared within the Working Group for discussion and feedback. Voting against the list of options determined priorities with consideration to the:

- Importance, potential impact, and cost-effectiveness;
- Potential for implementation to occur within a reasonable time period (2 to 5 years); and
- Relevant jurisdictional context and links to existing policy opportunities.

4. **Refine content and wording**

The content and wording of each priority area were refined, with expertise sought from outside the Working Group when appropriate.

5. **Endorse consensus statement**

Members sought endorsement from their respective organisations on the final version of the Consensus Statement.

6. **Invite broader support**

The Consensus Statement was circulated to stakeholders for further endorsement.

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