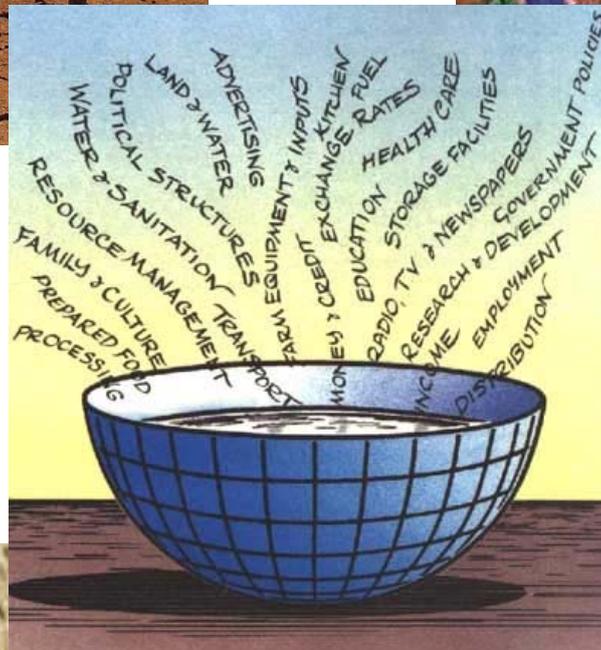
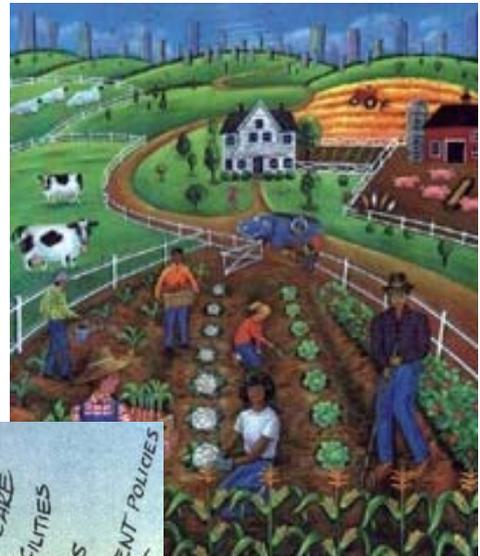
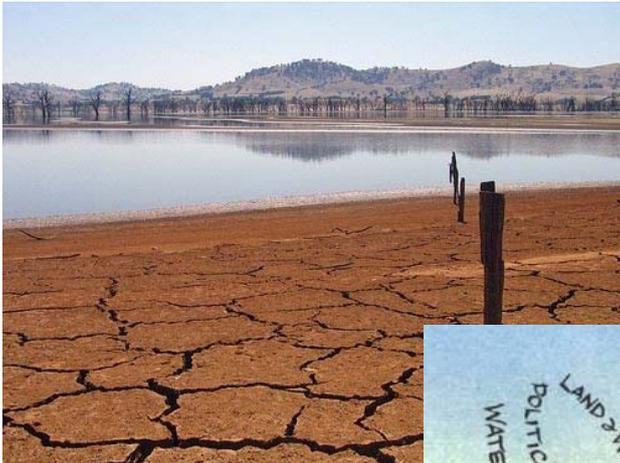


# Scoping a Food Policy Coalition



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A Report to the  
Victorian Health Promotion Foundation



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## I. INTRODUCTION

VicHealth has been involved in promoting healthy eating as a basis for health from the time the Foundation was established. In the past eight years it has primarily focused on research and community-level food security projects, typified by the Food for All programme. That project has had some success but is unable to address the most significant structural factors which are responsible for the insecure food system in Victoria and Australia.<sup>1</sup> It is from this background that the project to scope the establishment of a food policy<sup>#</sup> or security coalition<sup>\*</sup> in Victoria emerges.

In October 2008, VicHealth engaged the Human Rights and Bioethics Unit (“the Unit”) in the School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine at Monash University to undertake a scoping exercise for the establishment of a food policy coalition. The Unit was asked to:

- Document the strengths and weaknesses of various Food Policy Coalition models (including international examples).
- Conduct in-depth interviews with a maximum of twelve key informants (identified by VicHealth) to test the feasibility/receptivity of possible models and identify common issues for policy reform.
- Recommend a suitable model (including a proposed governance structure) for Victoria.
- Provide an estimated budget (including establishment and ongoing operational costings).
- Provide a list of key policy priorities and functions for the Coalition.

In addition to these tasks, the Unit conducted two forums with key informants in the area of food security. Participants in the first forum came from a wide range of backgrounds including agricultural policy, public health, urban planning, local government and food

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<sup>#</sup> For the purposes of this paper the group will be referred to as the Food Policy Coalition. Food security for all Victorians is what the group will seek to achieve.

<sup>\*</sup> There are many terms that might be used to describe a group including: coalition, alliance, initiative, peak body, organisation and so on. For the sake of convenience the term “coalition” will be adopted in this report, “Coalition” should be understood here as an umbrella term incorporating the many ways in which a group might choose to both structure and describe itself.

relief. The second forum was conducted with representatives of those groups already established at the programmatic end of the food security spectrum – urban agriculturalists and community gardeners. Representatives of State Government, agri-conglomerates and large retailers were not included in this initial exercise. Due to the time and resource constraints, and as VicHealth gives priority to the promotion of equity and has a strong alignment with disadvantaged groups in the community, it was considered both appropriate and essential to start the process by speaking to those groups who reflect these priorities in their work.

From the literature, the forums and the interviews it is possible to extract certain findings or areas of general agreement:

1. There is widespread support for a food policy coalition focusing on structural issues. This support comes from the full range of people spoken to, from academics in a variety of fields to community gardeners, and from urban planners to food relief organisations and public health practitioners.
2. The creation of such a coalition should be regarded as a matter of some urgency.
3. A future food policy coalition should have at least five key functions: leadership, advocacy, networking, research and education.
4. The coalition should focus on food systems from the perspective of population health and be informed by subject matter including agricultural policy, environmental and planning policy, economic, trade and industry policy and nutrition.
5. A 'joined-up' or inter-sectoral approach is necessary to address food security.

The remainder of this report will place the above findings in context and provide some options for VicHealth to consider. To that end Section II will explain the methodology used to gather information; Section III will summarise the literature review undertaken for this project, focusing specifically on what it means to say that a food system is 'secure'; Section IV will explain four potential functions the coalition may perform; and Section V will consider governance. Section VI will provide options for the model a coalition might adopt. Section VII asks 'Why VicHealth'. Section VIII set out the recommendations and Section IX, the conclusion.

It is worth noting at the outset that VicHealth has been uniformly praised by forum participants and project interviewees for taking the lead in undertaking what is regarded as a much-needed exercise.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The project was directed by a steering committee made up of the Unit, Beverley Woods representing the Victorian Local Governance Association, Kathy McConell from the School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine at Monash University (and a member of the VicHealth Healthy Eating Advisory Committee), Kirsten Larsen from the Victorian Eco-Innovation Lab at Melbourne University (and a member of the VicHealth Healthy Eating Advisory Panel), and Jane Potter and Lee Choon Siau from VicHealth. The role of the steering committee was to:

- Guide the conduct of the project
- Establish and monitor timelines for the completion of each part of the project
- Identify key areas for investigation
- Identify forum and interview participants.

Under the direction of the steering committee, a brief literature review was undertaken, two forums were held to elicit opinions and key informants were interviewed.

The purposes of the literature review were to identify key themes in food security and describe potential structures for a coalition. This research included searches of both academic and *grey* literature. Also included were many of the websites of food policy-style organisations already operating locally, regionally and internationally. These sites often presented the only information available about the various groups. Desktop research was continuous throughout the project, responding throughout to new information discovered in the forums and interviews.

Forum participants were selected by the steering committee. In order to select individuals broadly representative of interests in a field as complex as food policy, the committee first identified a range of criteria it deemed necessary to have covered. After some thought the

following descriptive categories were selected: natural, built, economic, socio-cultural and health environments. These categories were considered to represent settings in which barriers to 'whole of population food security' might be considered. Other fields were mapped against these categories including food system processes (agriculture, processing, storage and distribution, marketing, retail, consumption and waste) and domains of power (such as corporate, State and international). Participants were selected to reflect these criteria with an attempt to achieve fair representation across the range of concerns. The first forum was conducted on 8 December 2008 with 10 participants and the steering committee. Participants were provided with background reading explaining the project and the purpose of the forum – the purpose being to gauge whether there was support for the general enterprise, and if so discuss possible structures that a coalition might adopt, and finally to identify priority areas for action. Results from the forum were collated and analysed, and inform this report.

The second forum was conducted on 22 December 2008 with participants from agriculture, and community and urban gardening. This second forum was considered necessary for two reasons. First people working daily in these fields were likely to have different perspectives on policy priorities, practicalities and the usefulness of a coalition. Second, ultimately any food policy coalition will need to build on the expertise of people with this background. Gauging their views at an early stage would be a key indicator of the likely success or failure of a future coalition. The same materials were distributed for this forum as for the first and again participants were asked their thoughts about the desirability of some sort of food policy coalition, the structure it might take and their opinion of the priority interventions necessary to improve the food system. Again the results were collated and analysed, and inform subsequent discussion in this report.

Following the forums, and in keeping with the deliverables assigned by VicHealth, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted with experts who were either interstate, or deemed to have specialised knowledge better suited to individual interviews than the group forums. Twelve interviews were conducted in total with an extremely diverse range of experts. Each interviewee provided a unique and valuable perspective on how best to reform the food system and the role that a food policy coalition could play in that reform.

### III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The 1996 World Food Summit Plan of Action declares that:

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to enough safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy lifestyle.<sup>2</sup>

Other definitions, though they might vary in wording, also identify the same factors as being essential to food security: access to sufficient nutritious and appropriate food from non-emergency sources.<sup>3</sup> Thus a regional food system can only be said to be secure when it provides this degree and quality of access across the entire population. The achievement of this goal requires a food system that is environmentally, socially and economically resilient.

At present in Victoria, the food system cannot be described as 'secure'. *Australia's Health 2008* indicates that according to the '1995 and 2001 National Health Surveys\*', around 5% of surveyed adults (slightly more females than males) reported that there had been times in the previous 12 months when they had run out of food and could not afford to buy more.<sup>4</sup> The same report notes that 'in 2004–05, 5% of Indigenous Australians aged 12 years and over reported no daily vegetable intake and 14% reported no daily fruit intake. Daily vegetable and fruit intake varied by remoteness – 2% of Indigenous people living in non-remote areas reported no daily vegetable intake compared with 15% in remote areas; and 12% of Indigenous people living in non-remote areas reported no daily fruit intake compared with 20% in remote areas.'

In addition to this, and particularly in light of the recent and extraordinary Victorian bushfires, the security of Victoria's food system is under considerable stress and at risk of deteriorating. A 2008 report indicated that even prior to the current climatic conditions, the prices of fresh fruit and vegetables had risen 12% since September 2005, double the rate of the Consumer Price Index:<sup>5</sup> the rise having been driven by environmental factors and beginning to seriously affect access to food.<sup>6</sup> It should also be noted that a new report

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\* National Health Surveys are conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

from the Royal Institute of International Affairs indicates that 'Food supply will have to grow by 50% by 2030 to meet projected demand but climate change, water scarcity and competition for land will make it much harder to achieve this demanding target. A return to high oil prices will also increase food prices, as more crops are converted into bio-fuels.'<sup>7</sup>

Food security has traditionally been tackled as an emergency or relief exercise, with a focus on providing food to those individuals and families who are unable to afford it themselves.<sup>8</sup> Up until relatively recently, food security has rightly been an issue of *quantity* and the most prominent responses have been to provide food relief directly to the hungry.

Although quantity remains an issue for some sectors of the Australian population, the *quality* of food is increasingly becoming an important health issue. Excess consumption, whose physical reflection manifests most commonly as obesity, is epidemic and indicative of a food system which is promoting over-consumption of food irrespective of its nutritional value and failing to provide access to sufficient nutritious food to all sectors of the population (and, as already noted, particularly in the case of remote indigenous communities).<sup>9</sup>

Whereas remedying the quantity of food available to individuals in the short-term lends itself to community-level interventions such as food relief, the problems posed by excess consumption (which may co-exist with inadequate nutrition) are more difficult to address. The causes of excess consumption are difficult to identify with precision,<sup>10</sup> and the requisite solutions are not necessarily obvious.<sup>11</sup> It is, however, possible to state with certainty that the existing food system is characterised by the hyper-availability of energy-dense, nutrient-poor food which comprises an unhealthily large part of many people's diets.<sup>12</sup>

One example of a dysfunctional food system is the price difference between healthy and unhealthy foods.<sup>13</sup> The high price of fresh produce, in particular, affects the quality of food which is affordable for many households.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, obesity prevalence is highest in low-income groups who substitute cheaper energy-dense food for fresh produce.<sup>15</sup> The price of food cannot be influenced significantly by local community-based interventions, which is the focus of activity of many food security projects. Price is influenced instead by

environmental conditions like drought, by purchasing arrangements between producers and suppliers, by competition laws restricting (or failing to restrict) company behaviours and many other State and/or nationwide issues.

In order to address the quality of food and the nature of its availability, it is necessary to understand the structural factors which influence how much and what type of food is produced, where and how it is sold, and in what form. This is essential because it is only by considering the entire food chain that it is possible to see the ways in which factors like urban sprawl, agricultural policies that favour farmers forming contractual relationships with processors, innovation and export strategies, and vertical integration of the supply chain affect the nature of the food that is sold and eaten.

Once the complexity of the food system is recognised, it becomes clear that in order to genuinely improve food security in Victoria, a food policy coalition must both engender an understanding of these factors and identify which must be priorities for the coalition. Of the many food policy groups reviewed for this project, almost none seek to change the structural determinants of food security in this way.\* Instead, the most prevalent aim of groups, particularly in the United States, is to support the localisation of food by encouraging food grown locally to be bought and consumed locally. Potential projects for a Victorian food policy coalition might include scrutinising supermarket supply contracts with producers for unfair contract terms, or asking government to undertake such an exercise. Similarly, limits could be placed on the (currently considerable) mark-ups allowed on essential healthy foods like fruit and vegetables and scrutiny given to the comparatively poor payments provided to growers.

Interventions such as these may serve to improve food security by shifting control of the food supply towards farmers and consumers, and by creating greater diversity and competition in the manufacturing and retail sectors. Measures of this sort, focusing on the food system as a whole, are the only way to effectively address the current environment of food insecurity and would appear to be a natural focus for a food policy coalition. A business as usual approach will neither promote nor protect Victorians' access to sufficient nutritious food.

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\* An earlier attempt to create a food and nutrition group in Victoria is outlined in Appendix A.

## IV. THE FUNCTIONS

Our survey of existing groups and discussion arising from the forums and interviews indicate that food security or policy groups perform five main functions. These are leadership, advocacy, networking, research and education. They are discussed in turn.\*

### A. Leadership

Neither in government nor the community has any group, department or agency adopted a comprehensive approach to food security. There are a number of government bodies that support and promote the food industry, the Department of Human Services regulates food standards and safety and engages in campaigns such as “Go for your life” which has a focus on healthy eating, and the Department of Primary Industries states that it “enables Victoria’s agriculture and food sectors to maintain and enhance their reputation for world-class food by sustainably increasing wealth, employment and investment in regional communities.”<sup>16</sup> The Department of Sustainability and Environment considers the management of biodiversity while maintaining on-farm cash flow and productivity, as well as the overall management of the environment. The Department of Planning and Community Development is responsible for urban and rural planning in Victoria and so on.<sup>#</sup>

Efforts in the non-government sector are similarly piecemeal. There are groups working in: food relief, environmental sustainability, urban farming and community gardening, water, transport, health and obesity, and planning, amongst other matters. Other than the initiatives in food security funded by VicHealth and those auspiced by the Victorian Local Governance Association, there is no group that has food security as its focus that is able to bring together the range of perspectives and knowledge necessary to properly address food security in this State.

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\* The Community Food Security Coalition based in California runs a programme to 'support free of charge, the development and operation of current and emerging Food Policy Councils'. One of the ways it provides this support is by collecting relevant documents and summaries of all the active Food Policy Councils in the US and publishing them on its website. We provide this link here as it may be of interest: [www.foodsecurity.org/FPC](http://www.foodsecurity.org/FPC).

<sup>#</sup> We are unable to say whether there are any initiatives in the area of food security which have not yet been made public.

While not wishing to downplay the vital importance of the work being done in the community or in government, there is clearly an immense gap which is plainly recognised by those many individuals and groups whose work touches on food security. A food policy coalition could provide leadership both by demonstrating that an integrated approach to food policy is required and by identifying those issues that require urgent attention. The functions discussed in the following sections represent the sorts of activities that might be undertaken to fulfil the leadership role.

## **B. Advocacy**

Advocacy can take many forms. At its core advocacy is designed to influence public policy and is performed to achieve what the advocate believes to be in the public good. Thus it is possible to distinguish between a fast food restaurant lobbying against the imposition of nutritional standards, or a developer seeking to build accommodation on arable land in Victoria's urban fringes, and an independent food policy coalition advocating for contrary positions.

Some form of advocacy directed towards government policy and industry practice will be central to the work of any coalition. Many of the existing food groups include advocacy efforts within their functions.

An example of an Australian model is the Illawarra Food Fairness Alliance (IFFA). IFFA sits within the Healthy Cities Illawarra project which seeks to alter the upstream drivers of food insecurity and views advocacy as 'an important part of strengthening many facets of health...building healthy public policy, creating supportive environments, strengthening community action, and reorienting services toward health.'<sup>17</sup> So far the IFFA's advocacy efforts have been limited to local issues, particularly campaigns against urban development projects.

Given that the intention here is to consider food security in Victoria, rather than in a single local government area, none of the existing Australian models of organisations engaging in advocacy provide a direct example. A closer model is the state-wide New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council. The New Mexico Council was initiated through grass roots

activism and sits outside government. Each year the New Mexico Council identifies a small number of priorities in the State legislature upon which to focus its advocacy efforts.<sup>18</sup> The group has had solid successes in New Mexico, being responsible for the passing of legislation which guarantees locally grown produce be used in school lunches; a State-wide food coupon programme for low-income residents to buy locally grown food at farmers markets; appropriation of funding for tribal cooperatives to grow food; and ensuring that all food bank programmes use locally produced foods.<sup>19</sup>

The New Mexico Council's success in advocacy is based upon three factors which may be useful to emulate. The first is the *selection of specific focus areas*, rather than attempting to 'solve' food security all at once. A major failing of the now defunct South Australian Food Group was described by one of those interviewed for this project as trying to deal with all food security issues at the same time and not having clear priority areas. Which areas are chosen will ultimately be a decision for the coalition, but it is important that the coalition be tightly focused. The second is the *seniority of the people on the governing board*, which lends credibility to the organisation. Membership includes the City Treasurer, various members of government and representatives from agricultural unions and universities. Finally the Council's policy groups include *technical expertise on governance and legislative issues*. This way the advocacy efforts can be directed at the most appropriate individuals within the legislature, and the coalition can ensure that advocacy is presented in the correct forums at appropriate times.

Participants in the first forum were asked to identify their food policy priority areas in response to the question, 'what is your number one priority for improving the food system'. The priority most often invoked was the need for better environmental management to make agricultural production more sustainable. The second was the need to create a community groundswell behind food security, something similar to what has been achieved around water conservation. Third was the need to improve competition within the food industry by reducing vertical integration and limiting the control over the food system currently exercised by a small group of powerful companies. Finally, it was agreed that an evidence base was required to support advocacy in the first three areas.

### **C. Coordination and Networking**

There are many groups and individuals in Victoria working on aspects of food security. These include urban farmers who sell their produce locally, community gardeners, food relief organisations, food recyclers, environment groups and various project officers in local government and in public health. At present these groups and individuals predominantly work independently without coordinated support or effective ways to address the barriers they face in their work on food security.

By bringing relevant groups and individuals together, a food policy coalition could improve the work of these groups by enabling the sharing of technical and strategic knowledge, providing cross-sectoral assistance and encouraging more organised advocacy efforts. Providing a space for all of those interested in food security to interact may have a range of benefits. Groups and individuals performing the same type of work, such as urban gardeners, would have the opportunity to exchange strategies for obtaining funding, sourcing inexpensive inputs, identifying willing volunteers and more. At present the benefit of local successes in improving food security is likely to remain local. A State-wide coalition could ensure that successful strategies have greater impact.

As already indicated, it is also clear that in an area as vast as food policy there is enormous benefit to be had in bringing together groups with different knowledge bases and practical experience. Interviewees raised the importance of bringing like-minded individuals together in order to create a formal or informal network of people with similar aims enabling them to share expertise. A common hope from interviewees was that a politically savvy group of people would emerge with a range of interests and skills and the ability to work together. For example, it may be that community gardeners do not have the expertise to challenge urban planning decisions, whereas those working in planning could provide useful advice or assistance. A broad-based coalition with members from a variety of sectors will encourage greater understanding of food system concerns and generate useful responses.

The Sydney Food Fairness Alliance (SFFA), seeks to fulfil this networking function, having been formed to 'coordinate the efforts of rural producers, health professionals, community

workers and community-based advocates active in developing a socially, economically and environmentally sustainable food system in the Sydney region'.<sup>20</sup> By bringing all of these different groups together, the SFFA has been able to coordinate projects across sectors, and this year is aiming to prepare the groundwork for developing a NSW Food Policy.

Eat Well Tasmania (EWT) is now a corporate body focused on nutrition promotion (rather than food security) that was originally auspiced by the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association. They operate under a service agreement with the Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services and the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association. EWT invites any nutrition promotion idea or project to apply to use their logo which they say 'is readily recognised throughout the community.'<sup>21</sup> It provides projects with technical assistance in identifying potential partners, funding sources and providing access to nutrition resources. It also encourages collaboration between its members in the belief that it is most effective for people working towards the same goal to do so together. EWT had 280 nutrition promotion partnerships from 1 July 2006 to 30 June 2007 and takes a more active approach to creating partnerships than does the SFFA.

As the examples show, coordination and networking could be a useful function of a food policy coalition. Merely holding regular meetings and inviting relevant groups may be sufficient to create an informal network through which information and expertise is shared. Alternatively the central coalition could adopt a more structured approach by virtue of the design of board and committee membership and through the organisation of cross-sectoral programmes and activities which bring members and others together for a variety of purposes. No matter what coalition structure might be adopted, it is clear that involvement from those with differing bodies of knowledge and experience will be required to comprehensively address a matter as multi-factorial as food security.

#### **D. Education**

Education aimed towards agencies with responsibility for public policy falls within the category of advocacy. Education of coalition members and the broader community will be addressed here. The term education should be understood as incorporating both the

building of a greater understanding of food security and capacity building to strengthen the ability of members to undertake certain roles and tasks.

There was a strong feeling amongst forum participants and interviewees that while members of any new coalition might have deep knowledge of their own 'patch', it would be necessary to give members the opportunity to be informed about a range of matters such as the structural underpinnings and governance of the food system and of significant fields that impact upon their particular concerns.

Educating the broader community is also a common aim of many of the existing food policy groups. The following are examples of groups whose purposes include educating the public:

- Sydney Food Fairness Alliance
- Eat Well Queensland
- Hawkesbury Food Program
- Dane County Food Policy Council
- UK Food Group
- Welsh Food Alliance

An education function is regarded as necessary because it is thought that the public does not properly understand the concept of food security, or its importance in the Australian environment.<sup>22</sup> Education may improve knowledge, create a body of support for advocacy, and most importantly engage the public in the debate.

One interviewee argued that education was not the proper role of a food policy organisation which is seeking to alter the structural factors influencing food security. She argued that this role would be a waste of resources for the coalition – media campaigns being very expensive – and is the proper concern of government and other community organisations. The recent Victorian 'Go for your life' campaign illustrates that this is one area the government is already engaged in, in part. However, although general population-level education about the importance of good nutrition may be an unsuitable function for the coalition, other programmes unlikely to be undertaken by government focusing on structural determinants may be a useful way of engaging the public and existing

community-based organisations. In addition, advocacy campaigns may also have an educative function.

## **E. Research**

There has been considerable work completed in the last 12 months on food security in Victoria. The VEIL report<sup>23</sup> and the Paddock to Plate report<sup>24</sup> present Victoria's food system as being precariously balanced and at extreme risk from environmental factors like climate change, soil degradation and water shortages. More research is required, however, before we will have a thorough picture of the Victorian and Australian food system complete with its economic and regulatory drivers, and an understanding of the impact of the food system on other significant social concerns. There are also many details that some would argue are unjustly inaccessible: for example, the content of supermarket contracts with suppliers and the effect these arrangements have on prices for fresh produce in supermarkets, or on food wastage.

Both the forum attendees and many interviewees identified the need for further research exploring the complexity of food security, and the formulation of useful responses, as a priority function for the proposed coalition. Good research was discussed as being particularly relevant to strengthening advocacy efforts.

A research function could be contracted out and/or performed by the coalition itself, as is the case with the UK Centre for Food Policy.<sup>25</sup> Alternately the coalition could try to assist members to obtain funding from other sources, as does Eat Well Tasmania and the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council. However, this would detract from the aim of having a targeted research program. Funding the research internally provides the coalition with control over the research agenda but, depending on the size and nature of the projects undertaken, may be relatively costly. Seeking external research funding might be possible but again has the disadvantage of placing control over the research agenda with external agencies. Depending on the way the coalition is ultimately constituted, it may begin by relying upon research undertaken by members, but aim to develop research as a core function to support advocacy efforts.

## **V. GOVERNANCE**

### **A. Clarifying structure**

The structure of a food policy coalition will, to a large extent, determine the long-term sustainability of the coalition. A durable structure which maintains the interest and commitment of members is fundamental if the coalition is to achieve its objectives. Poor governance and structure, on the other hand, can sabotage a coalition's otherwise excellent efforts.

The major decisions to be made regarding the make-up of a future coalition are common to all three models. These will be discussed in the following section and are:

- How the structure is to be formalised
- Whether the membership should include government and/or industry or be independent of both
- From whom funding will be accepted.

The purpose of organisational structure is to promote good governance, governance being: 'the set of responsibilities and practices, policies and procedures, exercised by a group's executive, to provide strategic direction, ensure objectives are achieved, manage risks and use resources responsibly and with accountability.'<sup>26</sup> Thus for this coalition, good governance will mean a structure which is conducive to achieving goals, which vests an identifiable group with direction setting, and which provides transparency in the allocation of finances.

The importance of organisational structuring to organisational effectiveness cannot be over emphasized. Without effective organisational design organisations are unable to manage their processes and systems.

The key characteristics of an effective management structure are:

- the group has clearly identified responsibilities for the key levels of members involved

- the people concerned have formal statements of their responsibilities and are accountable for them, and
- the communication lines are short.<sup>27</sup>

Groups need to have an approach to governance that enables them to deliver their outcomes effectively and achieve high levels of performance, in a manner consistent with applicable legal and policy obligations.

## **B. Formalising the structure**

The structure of the food policy coalition may be formalised either by drafting a constitution setting out the different facets of the coalition and their responsibilities; or by choosing a form of legally recognised incorporation. Whereas a constitution-only approach provides substantial freedom to the coalition in regarding its establishment and responsibilities, incorporation comes with a variety of duties and privileges prescribed by law.

A small group, perhaps a think tank, could come together informally, and merely assign a name to its meeting. There would be no need for the structure to be at all formalised as long as each member of the think tank agreed on the proper way for the coalition to function. Once arguments developed about the proper direction or methods of the coalition, it could easily fail. Clear rules regarding processes and responsibility for decision making and how disputes are to be resolved lessen the likelihood of this possibility arising. Further issues arise when funding becomes available.

Rules, necessary for the long-term survival of an organisation, can be set out in a constitution agreed upon by the coalition. Thus it is possible to set out the form that the organisation will take along with descriptions of its various functions and the responsibilities of different members. A constitution need not have tasks set in stone, but could be drafted to allow for the coalition to evolve over time in a direction chosen by the membership. If the coalition remains un-incorporated, the constitution can structure the organisation in any way it deems appropriate. If the coalition incorporates, some structures will be precluded based upon the type of incorporation chosen.

If the coalition is to secure and hold funding assets for the purposes of conducting its activities, the most appropriate legal structure is likely to be that of an association incorporated under Victorian legislation. This structure offers the ability for the coalition to take the benefits of incorporation (separate legal personality, facilitation of contracting, property ownership etc.), and to clearly define the rights and responsibilities of participants as well as goals and purposes for the association (all of which can be subsequently revised should the need arise). Simultaneously, the incorporated association structure acknowledges the coalition's non-profit status (all profits generated by an incorporated association must be applied towards the defined purposes of the association, and are not ordinarily subject to tax).

The process of establishing and administering an incorporated association is relatively simple and inexpensive. Rules setting out the rights and responsibilities of membership, purposes of the association and miscellaneous administrative matters will be required. Standard rules of incorporation are available from Consumer Affairs Victoria, and can be easily supplemented with goals, processes and mechanisms that coalition members wish to entrench.

As will be discussed below, a long-standing, sustainable coalition will most likely require some level of administrative staffing support. This support could be provided by an existing organisation that the coalition sits within (like the Obesity Policy Coalition's relationship with the Cancer Council) and the need to have the coalition handle funds could be avoided. If the coalition is to be a separate entity, however, even one which sits within an existing organisation but where funding is kept separate, it will be necessary for the coalition to incorporate under statute, otherwise the conduct of projects and entering into contracts on its own behalf will become highly problematic.

### **C. Industry and government involvement**

The argument for including government and industry is that they are the two sectors most responsible for creating and sustaining the existing food system. As such they are also the two groups most capable of improving that system. Since the purpose of the coalition's activities will be to improve the food system, it is logical that industry and

government be included from the beginning so, the argument goes, they will be more likely to engage with ideas and implement change. This argument was made by a minority of the interviewees we spoke to, though conversely none of the forum attendees considered industry involvement desirable. Many of the food security groups reviewed for this scoping project include either or both of government and industry, Sustain UK being a notable exception. Many of the groups did place limits on the type of industry that could be included, most making a distinction between for profit and not for profit companies, or small farming enterprises and large agribusiness.

The argument against including industry and government is that the coalition's effectiveness in advocacy is conditional on its independence from the groups to which it advocates. Thus it will impugn the coalition's credibility if it makes statements about the environmental unsustainability of the food system while at the same time counting among its members the worst environmental polluters. The second risk of industry involvement, in particular, is that the coalition's processes may be hijacked to become part of the industry's public relations scheme. The Australian Food and Grocery Council (an industry representative group) recently responded savagely to the government's willingness to consider taxing food which is high in sugar or salt.<sup>28</sup> It would be a great shame if industry groups were able to influence a coalition's processes to the extent where the coalition was advocating against government policy favourable to food security such as that made evident in the example just described.

It would be possible in the way the coalition is incorporated to limit the types of industry and/or government which are permitted membership of the coalition. For example, all new members must be approved by the governing board of a coalition and any requests by industry deemed hostile to the coalition could be rejected. A prerequisite for membership could be that the industry group not demonstrate practice inconsistent with the aims of the coalition or make a profit, or make a profit exceeding a certain amount, essentially excluding the biggest businesses with the most to gain by frustrating the coalition's purposes.

In the early stages of the coalition's life, the risk of industry taking over the coalition is a pertinent risk to consider. There are many industry groups that will not be receptive to what is entailed in the concept of food security. Excluding industry at the outset still leaves

open the option of allowing their membership at a later stage. Food Fairness Illawarra, for example, was created independently of government and advocates to government regarding food security<sup>29</sup> but now includes industry and government members. The California Food and Justice Coalition is similar to Food Fairness Illawarra – the organisation exists outside government and advocates to government, but includes representatives of government departments on its steering committee.

Having government representation may leave a coalition subject to the criticism of being partisan. In addition representatives of government, if appointed in that capacity, may be constrained in their ability to participate. They may find themselves in a conflicted position, which though different in quality from that of industry, is similarly problematic. In both instances, be it the exercise of industry or government influence, public confidence in such a coalition may be significantly diminished.

If industry and government are excluded, what of individual membership of industry and government employees? This issue was raised by both interviewees and forum attendees and there was general consensus that allowing individuals associated with excluded organisations to be members as individuals was acceptable. One interviewee with experience on a committee that had adopted this position, argued that having a government officer there as an individual was not feasible in practice. He found that the government employee was never clear on what he should and should not speak about and there was significant confusion as to whether his statements reflected his own beliefs or government policy. The interviewee suggested that both industry and government be allowed full membership, or their employees be excluded.

#### **D. Funding**

Although a coalition will rely on volunteer support to some degree, seed funding will be required to enable the initiative to get off the ground. Needless to say, the more funding that the coalition can obtain, the more likely is its success.

There are many different ways for the coalition to acquire funding that may be summarised as:

- Membership fees
- Philanthropy and donations
- Direct government funding
- Funding through a statutory authority
- Industry funding
- Sponsorships
- Accepting advertising

Accepting money directly from government or industry raises the same questions as their involvement in the coalition and will not be rehashed here. It is sufficient to note that there are potential risks around the way the coalition may be perceived, and risks that funders may use their financial power to exert overt or covert pressure on the setting of policy and priorities.

In the case of a peak group, member organisations may provide a significant and reliable funding base. Membership fees may also apply to groups with individuals as members. A number of interviewees suggested that no fee should be charged to become a member of a 'grass-roots' coalition in order to ensure that there was no financial barrier to taking part. However this problem can be addressed by creating a scale of fees, leaving some memberships at no charge.

There are many ways in which such a coalition might engage with government and industry. Membership may be one means, but it may suffer from unnecessary complexity which is not present in dealings conducted at arms' length.

## **VI. THE MODEL – FIVE OPTIONS**

### **A. Introduction**

Broadly speaking there are five non-mutually exclusive models that might be adopted by a coalition, and many structural variations possible for each model. This section will discuss these models, highlighting existing organisations utilising the structure and any functions which are suited to their structures and means of governance.

The models that will be discussed are:

- Independent think tank: a group which develops and reviews policy, makes public statements about broader food policy issues
- Advisory Committee: a group that is generated by a parent body to provide it with advice according to terms of reference determined by that parent body
- Peak group: an independent body which brings together existing groups working in the area
- Group with general membership: an independent body with a potentially very large membership which brings together existing groups and individuals with an interest in the area
- University-based group: a group which sits within a University and which focuses primarily on research and advocacy.

These models are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the most successful food policy groups have included a combination of the think tank role with a broader membership. Aspects of each could potentially be combined within the one group, although to do so from the beginning would be ambitious. In addition, the nature of the coalition may change over time, both in terms of membership and the way decisions are made. Very few of the existing groups reviewed had maintained the same structure for the duration of their

existence. Any decisions made about the structure of the group at the outset may be preliminary rather than binding.

## **B. Think tank**

A “think tank” is typically a small group made up of individuals who are recognised as experts on the particular topic, have extensive relevant networks, and are otherwise deeply engaged in research and practice in the area. In this instance the function of a think tank would be to devise and respond to policies and practices which impact upon food security.

A think tank may publicly criticise policies unfavourable to food security and make formal submissions to government. A think tank of this type can provide an excellent basis for advocacy efforts. Many organisations which have a broad-based democratic membership couple this with a smaller executive arm which acts, in some ways, like a think tank.

Think tanks are generally composed of a small number of experts who have the technical capacity to review government and industry policy. It is important that a think tank be able to be both proactive and respond quickly to government announcements and industry activity. One person interviewed was particularly in favour of a small group of experts (of which Victoria has many) to act as a ‘lean machine’ in addressing the government’s food policy. This was contrasted to groups with large memberships in which agreed policies may require significant time and effort, and where processes of authorisation may be required in advance of public statements. (Of course structural deficiencies of the sort that hamper the capacity to respond quickly can be resolved with attention to decision-making processes in a coalition’s constitution.)

There are few existing groups which fit neatly into the think tank model. The Centre for Policy Development, launched in May 2007, describes itself as an Australian independent public interest think tank dedicated to seeking out creative, viable ideas and innovative research to inject into Australia’s policy debate. They work to develop and disseminate practical policy ideas and to translate academic research into ‘real world’ proposals and

analysis. They have a very strong online presence and an intentionally open and accessible publishing and policy development model.<sup>30</sup>

The Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, formed in November 2002, is another example of a think tank. This Group is sponsored by the Purves Environment Fund and states that it is committed to using the combined experience, scientific expertise and shared values of each of its 13 members to work with others to improve the long-term management and conservation of the Australian landscape.<sup>31</sup>

The shortage of food policy think tanks is most likely a function of funding difficulties rather than because such a group would be unsuccessful *per se*. The Obesity Policy Coalition (OPC) in Victoria provides a streamlined example of the concept – it sits within an independent organisation and is not funded directly by government. The OPC has been able to create a relatively high profile and win some policy success, with only a very small number of staff. A think tank could also rely, in part, upon people who might volunteer their time. However, some form of core funding would be necessary to enable such a group to organise and have impact.

Members may self select or might in the first instance be appointed as part of an initiative of another group before emerging as an independent entity.

### **C. Advisory Committee**

Advisory committees can be regarded as a kind of minimalist think tank, but are the initiative of a parent organisation. An advisory committee might sit within government or another group and be composed of representatives from many areas such as local government, industry and community organisations. Working groups created by the committee might focus on specific policy issues chosen by the committee and membership of the working groups will vary according to the issue being addressed. However advisory committees will always be constrained by their terms of reference, and their duties to and relationship with their auspicing body.

The Maine Food Policy Council in the United States is an example of a group set up by government to provide advice on food. This Council's purpose is to advise the State government. Membership of the Maine Council includes representatives from four State departments, consumer advocates, groups providing food assistance, the food industry and academics. The Council meets up to four times a year and prepares briefs for the Governor, legislature and state agencies. An advisory committee of this type has the advantage of sitting within a government which considers food security sufficiently serious to warrant a response. In the absence of such commitment from the relevant government authorities or another suitable organisation, advisory committees are not feasible.

#### **D. Peak Body**

Peak bodies are typically democratic or semi-democratic bodies in which a large number of individuals and/or organisations come together for the purpose of presenting a unified voice to policy makers and the public. These groups claim legitimacy from the number or importance of the members they represent.

Peak bodies may have memberships derived from a wide range of communities of interest, from "grassroots" organisations to industry groups. Sustain in the United Kingdom is perhaps the best-known example of a peak body concerned with food security. It was mentioned with enthusiasm by many interviewees. Sustain represents over 100 organisations, all of which pay membership dues which provide its main income stream. Membership is limited to non-profit organisations. The members elect a governing council of 15 members who oversee the running of projects which are performed by project staff. Neither the Governing Council nor the project staff may set the policy priorities of Sustain – major priorities must be approved by the membership. However, the Governing Council is permitted to respond to government policy as it arises without consultation with the full membership.

A peak body can refute charges of being elitist or out of touch as its credibility arises from its membership base. It is however, more cumbersome to administer and requires clear governance systems which ensure accountability to members and the public.

## **E. Group with general membership**

Such a group will possess many similarities to a peak body with the exception of its membership base which will not be solely defined by groups representing particular interests related to food security. A good example of a broadly based food group is the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council. This group was created by individuals concerned about food security in New Mexico and has evolved over time to include organisations. In 2003 the Government of New Mexico issued a House Joint Memorial stating that legislators and government agencies should also be encouraged to participate in the Council.<sup>32</sup> Unlike Sustain, any interested organisation or individual can join the Council. The major policy work is completed by smaller policy groups which are formed to consider specific issues. These policy groups are appointed by the Governing Board, rather than being elected by the main group.

## **F. University-based research initiative**

There are many university-based research groups which focus on aspects of food policy. From centres for public health nutrition to WHO collaborating centres for obesity, there is now a substantial amount of research being performed around food and the food system. Few of these groups are sufficiently influential to be in a position to engage in policy advocacy on a grand scale. The exception is the UK Centre for Food Policy at the University of London headed by Tim Lang.

The Centre's policy work includes consultancy activities for the World Health Organisation, the World Bank, the Food Standards Agency (UK), Greenpeace and the Home Office. Work of this type can serve a powerful advocacy purpose. However, creating a group of this type is more difficult than the other options considered thus far. Where the other groups can establish their legitimacy based on shared expertise or democratic support, a research group of this type must establish both its academic credentials in the field of food policy and its public credibility. There are few academics working in the area of food in Australia with the combination of qualities of Tim Lang. This is not to say that such a group is impossible to create in Australia, but rather that it is highly dependent upon finding

the right mix of qualities in the particular group of individuals who are located at the same university.

## **VII. WHY VICHEALTH?**

It may be argued that an initiative such as a food policy coalition is best left to government to form or should emerge organically as a community enterprise. At this time, however, not only is there a vacuum, but there is consensus that this vacuum needs to be filled and urgently. All forum participants and interviewees were in agreement on this point. The urgency is a product of many factors: climate change, obesity, environmental degradation, lack of access to nutritious food (particularly in remote indigenous communities), globalisation of trade and the rise of dominant global agri-conglomerates, the pervasive impact of food marketing, and the impending world oil shortage – to name a few.

One of the authors of this report was involved in the legislative review that produced the 1987 Victorian Tobacco Act, as a part of a package of new health law. VicHealth was born amidst enormous controversy. It was by no means clear that VicHealth would become an acceptable or accepted part of the Victorian health landscape. There were influential corporate interests agitating against the creation of a statutory authority with the objectives of VicHealth. Nonetheless what emerged was historic and imaginative law supporting an innovative agency whose work has since been emulated elsewhere.

The first object of VicHealth is to 'fund activity related to the promotion of good health, safety or the prevention and early detection of disease'. VicHealth states that it 'works in partnership with organisations, communities and individuals to make health a central part of our daily lives'. VicHealth further notes that '(p)romoting health by fostering change in social, economic, cultural and physical environments underpins our mission'.<sup>33</sup> Not only is the provision of support for some sort of a food policy coalition consistent with VicHealth's mission, VicHealth is ideally placed to support such a project. VicHealth is viewed in the community as both a leader and as non-partisan. It has the capacity to support the generation of partnerships for health unlike most other bodies in the State. Indeed, the participants in this study not only regarded VicHealth's involvement in this exercise a natural outcome of its interests in health and in food security in particular, but were thankful that VicHealth had chosen to embrace this project.

## **VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The recommendations made here are informed by what might be practically achievable and are directed towards both the short and longer term.

In the longer term a coalition undertaking the sort of work carried out in the style of a Tim Lang/Sustain UK combination appears to be what is wanted. The ideal coalition would conduct rigorous analysis, produce innovative responses, provide leadership to the field, advocate for changes to policy, enable networking, educate its members and the public, and have a broad base of support. VicHealth cannot create this directly.

Groups like this evolve through the contributions and decisions of those who are actively involved. No matter how much any person or group might wish to establish a broadly based food policy coalition, it will need to commence as a small initiative by a committed group of people. It will be up to this group to build links, forge partnerships, create a recognisable profile, gain credibility for themselves and their work, devise a mission and objectives, nominate functions and continually strengthen the enterprise.

In order for this smaller group to operate effectively, financial support is crucial. Support must be available for: policy development; networking amongst groups with consistent

aims with a view to establishing a larger group; some advocacy and administration. It is suggested that the equivalent of three full-time staff be engaged on an interim basis to carry out these tasks. The staff must possess amongst their number, substantive knowledge of food security, research skills, procedural or networking ability in order to facilitate the coming together of the larger vision, and administrative skills. It is unlikely that facility in each of these fields will be found in one or even two individuals. They will require the usual infrastructure and access to library services.

As this would be an initiative without precedent in Victoria, identifying suitable staff and finding the right location will require time. Depending on the availability of funds, a less ambitious and interim step might be taken. One full-time person and two part-time people might be employed for a period of 18 months to two years as a pilot exercise to test the feasibility of such a venture.

## **IX. CONCLUSION**

At present there is no organisation in Victoria whose focus is food security as described in this paper and whose target is the population of Victoria. The urgency is real. There is consensus amongst those actively involved that such a body is needed. VicHealth is ideally placed to support the formation of such a group, which should ultimately develop an independent existence. In the longer term, the group's mission, whether it consists only of peak bodies or not, or gives priority to one issue over another, should be a matter for the group to decide and really cannot (and should not) be pre-determined by an exercise like this. However the contribution the VicHealth will have made to the future wellbeing of Victorians through its support of the early phases of the life of such a coalition will have been substantial.

## **X. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This report was written by Associate Professor Bebe Loff and Brad Crammond from the Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, with assistance from Beverley Wood of the Victorian Local Governance Association, Kathy McConell, Jo Bird and Vishaal Kishore, also from the Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, and Lee Choon Siau and Jane Potter from VicHealth.

## **XI. APPENDIX**

### **Snapshot of the Victorian Food and Nutrition Policy Project – Lessons for health promotion**

**Mark Lawrence, Deakin University**

In 1987 the Victorian government became the first government in Australia to develop a food and nutrition policy. The policy was based on the Dietary Guidelines for Australians and recommended a variety of research, education and regulation-based interventions to promote healthy eating. In anticipation of the policy's acceptance by the State government, the 'Food and Nutrition Policy Project' (FNPP) had been established in 1985–86 as a joint initiative of the Health Department Victoria, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Education. It was intended that the FNPP be the implementation arm of the policy and over the next 10 years it proceeded through a period characterised by a rapid rise, stability and then ultimate demise in implementing food and nutrition policy throughout Victoria. Among many outputs during this period were:

- The Victorian food and nutrition survey as an evidence base for activities
- Development and distribution of extensive food and nutrition curriculum materials for primary and secondary teachers
- Training programs for primary and secondary teachers
- Resource materials for community health workers
- Development of resources and training programs for chefs
- Implementation of worksite healthy eating programs in workplaces throughout Victoria
- Development of a 'farm' for unemployed youth in Broadmeadows
- A community development scheme for healthy eating activities
- Sponsorship arrangements with a variety of sporting and art clubs and events as part of the replacement of tobacco sponsorship

The development and establishment of the policy and FNPP coincided with the establishment of the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation. This period also coincided with the emergence of QUIT as a highly successful health promotion campaign model. It was argued that the QUIT governance model and funding mechanism be adopted for the newly established FNPP. This resulted in the management of the FNPP being shifted from the Health Department to the then Deakin Institute of Human Nutrition, an independent academic agency, with an interdepartmental committee (IDC - from Health, Agriculture and Education) overseeing its strategic direction and operation. This governance arrangement was referred to as 'outhing'. By the late 80's and into the 90s, the administration of funding for the FNPP activities shifted from the Health Department to VicHealth. With a change of State government, support for the policy diminished and from the early to mid-90s the FNPP's work program became focussed on individual short-term activities. The coherence of the FNPP work programme diminished and the IDC no longer met. The approach was not sustainable and the FNPP ceased operating in 1997.

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