

Inquiry into food security in Australia

Addressing hunger, resilience and systems change

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Contact Person

Dr Kiah Smith, School of Social Science | The University of Queensland
Phone: +61 7 3365 2486 | Email: k.smith2@uq.edu.au

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Summary and Recommendations

1.1 Introduction

Food security is defined by the FAOⁱ as ‘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’. This has four pillars: availability (supply, quantity, quality), access (capacity to afford a nutritious diet), utilisation (knowledge, skills, infrastructure) and stability (over time).

This definition has been widely criticised for over-emphasising food production at the expense of **structural inequalities that lie at the heart of people’s experiences of hunger**. Research shows that despite the world producing enough food to feed 1.5 times the global population, hunger is rising.^{ii,iii} Although Australia is a wealthy food-exporting nation, domestic hunger remains a significant problem - in 2022, over two million households (21%) experienced severe food insecurity, with renters, low-income households, those on welfare support payments, and families with children being particularly vulnerable.^{iv} Indigenous Australians are five to six times more likely to be food insecure than other Australians.^v Critical food scholars have demonstrated that hunger results from inequitable access to healthy, affordable and sustainable diets, alongside inefficient and destructive production and consumption practices that generate high volumes of food waste. These are underpinned by deeper structural problems including income poverty and inequality (which is itself rising, and strongly associated with class, race and gender inequalities), high food prices driven by supermarkets, and the environmental consequences of industrialised food systems focused on exports at the expense of sustainable local and regional food economies.^{vi,vii} **Food justice is required**, defined as “ensuring more equitable access to food that is ecologically sustainable, healthy and fairly produced, exchanged and consumed^{viii}”.

In addition to the FAO’s pillars of food security above, Clapp et al.^{ix} has suggested two further components: agency and governance. These refer to the need for people to have capacity to shape their relationships with food systems and address power imbalances, including through meaningful input into governance processes. This highlights the need for food security decision-making to become more participatory and democratic, especially in light of high corporate concentration within Australia’s industrial food system.^x Although evidence shows that civil society participation in food systems governance contributes to building healthy, sustainable and just food systems^{xi} and improving food access,^{xii} Australian civil society is often excluded from food systems governance.

With this as background, **this submission describes solutions to food insecurity that aim to address the drivers of social, economic and environmental inequalities associated with hunger in Australia**. These solutions reflect transformations that civil society has long mobilised around: localising food production, strengthening ‘ethical consumption’ building resilience through shorter supply chains, embedding the right to food in legislation, and improving participatory food governance. Specifically, we present evidence for how **community food networks** such as urban gardens, community supported agriculture, farmers’ markets, organic cooperatives, food charities, food hubs, food swaps, and ‘fair food’ organisations are important civil society stakeholders who actively confront inequalities within food systems. These stakeholders need greater government support for their food security work.

From an international perspective, taking a more inclusive and holistic approach to food security directly responds to the United Nations 2030 Agenda and **Sustainable Development Goals**, whereby SDG#2 Zero Hunger specifically calls for a ‘fundamental transformation of the way we grow and eat food’^{xiii}. The SDGs provide a framework that connects ‘Zero Hunger’ with interconnected environmental (e.g. climate action), social (e.g. no poverty, education for all) and economic (e.g. reduced inequalities, decent work) shifts. As

signatory to the SDGs, Australia must demonstrate progress against the interconnected targets and indicators, but to date, both commitment and progress has been poor. ^{xiv,xv}

Beginning in 2019, we at UQ have been conducting a national Australian Research Council funded study to explore how Australian community food networks envision and work towards more just and sustainable food systems. These networks include three main types of practices or actor:

1. Alternative/local food provisioning, which includes producing food in community and backyard gardens, and (re)distributing food through community supported agricultures, food co-ops, food hubs, food swaps and food relief charity networks
2. Eco-social practices centring sustainability in food systems, by connecting economy, environment and society in practices such as agroecology and solidarity economy.
3. Civic food governance, as indicated by the growth of ‘fair food’ coalitions, networks and research and policy advocacy initiatives, and mechanisms such as food policy councils and local food plans.

Engaging over 100 participants from these networks, our research project asked: **What does your fair food future look like, and how do we get there?** Starting with key ‘drivers of change’ identified by participants, we used an innovative future scenarios methodology to explore multiple pathways for food system reform in Australia. This submission presents key findings from *Fair Food Futures* combined with interdisciplinary research that speak directly to the terms of reference of this Senate Inquiry into Food Security in Australia.

1.4 Recommendations

We thank the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture for the opportunity to contribute to this important and timely inquiry. This submission argues for:

- A ‘food systems’ approach, whereby food security goes beyond agriculture and food production-distribution-consumption to recognise that reforms must also **address social justice** (including addressing the systemic causes of hunger, food poverty and inequality - otherwise known as ‘food justice’).
- Urgent reform of food systems to **respect, protect and enhance ecological systems** on which all life depends (land, soils, water etc), in line with ecological boundaries, through policy reforms that support short local supply chains, agroecological and regenerative farming practices, circular food economies, and strong climate action.
- Enhanced participation of civil society (in particular, community food networks and policy coalitions) in food governance that is more inclusive and democratic across all levels, but especially via the establishment of a **National Food Policy Council** led by civil society stakeholders.
- Improved engagement by government (at all levels) in mobilising the UN Sustainable Development Goals as an integrated framework for food security reform, with the urgent addition of **Right to Food** legislation.

We have synthesised key messages in a short online animation, which we welcome the committee to watch as a complementary resource to this submission. These findings can help communities and policy makers to debate equitable pathways to achieve Zero Hunger and help to reform food system governance with stronger participation from civil society. Watch it here: [Translating ideas to action – Fair Food Futures](#)

Terms of Reference

2.1 National production, consumption and export of food

Improving Australia’s food security has less to do with increasing production (or exports), and much more to do with progressing responsible production and consumption of healthy and nutritious food from more sustainable and equitable food systems. While Australia is not widely seen to have a food security problem, inequitable access to food is a significant domestic problem: in 2022, 3.3 million Australian households experienced some level of food insecurity. The rising cost of living is the most common reason behind food insecurity, with women, retired people, those on a disability pension, renters, low-income households, and people aged 55 and above being more vulnerable to its impacts.^{xvi} Indigenous Australians also experience food insecurity at much higher rates than the general population.^{xvii}

Although food charities provide short-term hunger relief, this can only address the symptoms of a much deeper structural problem. Data show that the number of meals distributed by food relief charities has increased drastically over the past decade, but food relief providers themselves acknowledge that they are unable to meet demand.^{xviii} Accessing food relief also carries a stigma, and the food provided may also be processed, unhealthy, and/or not aligned with cultural and dietary preferences. Ultimately, **reliance on food charities should be seen not as a solution to hunger** but as a sign that something is wrong with the food system.^{xix,xx,xxi}

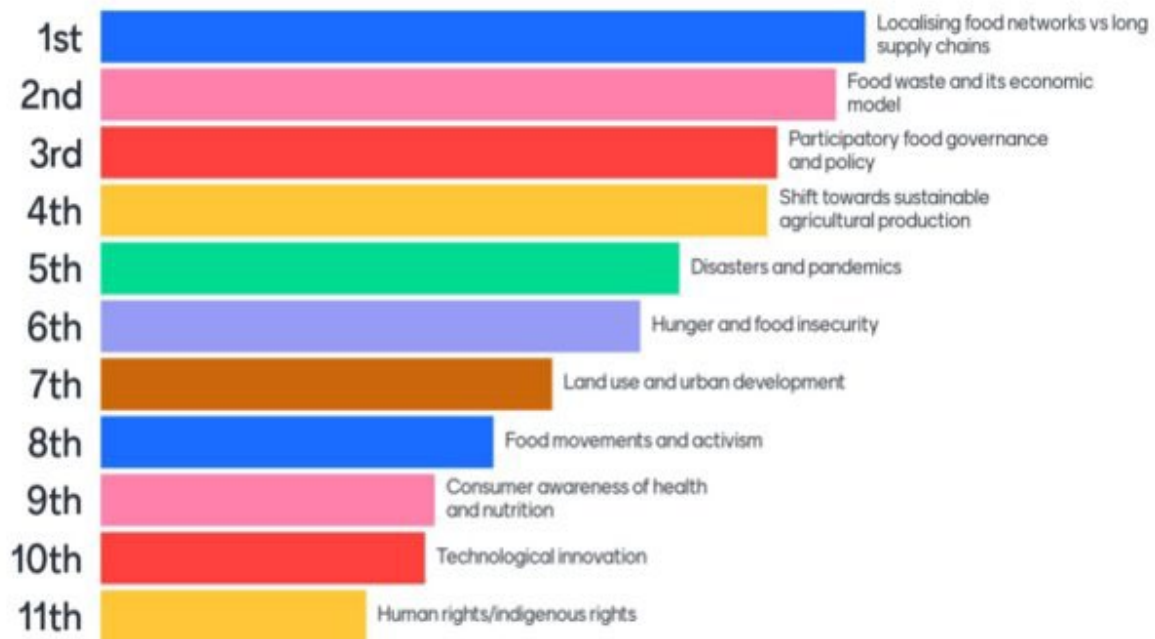
Furthermore, despite growing evidence of unequally distributed food (in)security in Australia, there is **no nationally-recognised or consistent approach to measuring food insecurity.**^{xxii} As such, we only have a partial understanding of the issue, and there may be additional pockets of ‘hidden hunger’ that policymakers and others in the sector are not aware of.

One aim of our research was to explore how stakeholders from community food networks understand the main drivers of change within food production and consumption (Fig 1). The most important shift was seen to be the growth of short (i.e. local) food networks, which was simultaneously understood to be constrained by the dominant model of long (i.e. supermarket-controlled) food supply chains. The second most important driver was the economic model of infinite growth and commodification that creates food waste; at the same time, solutions that reimagine economies to produce less food waste were seen to be key opportunities for achieving food justice. Third, participatory governance emphasises transforming decision making as a way to shift power relations within the food system.^{xxiii} Other drivers include:

- Environmental pressures (such as climate change, water availability, soil health, land use changes) forcing widespread shifts towards sustainable agricultural production, such as we see in the regenerative agriculture, agroecology, permaculture and organics movements
- More frequent and intense disasters and pandemics
- New thinking about the role of food charities and social support mechanisms such as welfare provisioning and basic income entitlements
- Urban development pressures on land use change, including the rising cost of farmland and tensions between land for farming and mining uses
- Food activism and ethical consumption as a force for change, particularly movements led by youth
- Health and nutrition awareness and education, which prompts shifts in ethical consumption but also involves contradictory marketing and advertising ‘trade offs’

- Technological innovation, particularly in agricultural production, but also around data and digital communication
- Tensions around the recognition and enforcement of human and indigenous rights (including specifically the right to food)

Figure 1: Ranked drivers of food system transformation, Fair Food Futures^{xxiv}



These findings indicate the need to **consider domestic food production and consumption in a more integrated way**. For example, our research shows that food security policies should aim to connect food with wider issues such as housing, income, healthcare, gender equality and Indigenous sovereignty. There is a strong role for the state (i.e. multiple levels of government) in improving policy coherence towards this goal. One positive example is in sustainable (or values-based) public/institutional food procurement – a practice which, as Galvin^{xxv} notes, already aligns with some existing policies and strategies in Australia. According to the FAO:

Sustainable public food procurement has the potential to impact both food consumption and food production patterns. It may enhance access to healthy diets for consumers of publicly procured food (such as schoolchildren) and promote the development of more sustainable food systems (through its demand and spillover effects). Sustainable public food procurement also has the potential to decrease rural poverty by stimulating the development of markets, providing a regular and reliable source of income for smallholder farmers and helping these farmers overcome barriers that prevent them from enhancing their productivity.^{xxvi}

At a broader level, making these holistic changes also requires a different approach to food systems governance. As mentioned previously, evidence from other countries supports the inclusion of civil society in decision-making as a way of improving food security and empowering citizens to build healthy, just, and sustainable food systems. However, **Australia currently does not have any formal processes in place to allow**

for civic participation in food systems governance, nor a cohesive national-level plan or approach for addressing domestic hunger.^{xxvii} Improved food system governance – based on increased participation and collaboration with civil society – is a key requirement for the creation of more holistic, systemic solutions to the social, environmental and economic drivers of food insecurity.

Finally, the unequal distribution of hunger in Australia indicates that **food security is a significant human rights issue.**^{xxviii} Our findings support a large body of evidence for pursuing food security through a human rights framework.^{xxix,xxx,xxxi} Human rights-focused approaches have the potential to address the impact of government action or inaction, including the structural causes (not just the symptoms) of social inequities. Article 25.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights sets out the right to food, stating,

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

Enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Article 11, consenting nation states are obligated to respect, protect and fulfil their commitments. Australia ratified the ICESCR in 1975; however, the Right to Food is not legislated in Australia, meaning it cannot be legally enforced.

Recommendations

1. Legislating the *Right to Food* into national and state food policy making, and a redesign of governance processes to better facilitate concrete human rights outcomes, should be an urgent priority.
2. Nation-wide food security measurement that is tailored to the Australian context.^{xxxii}
3. Scoping and supporting a civic-led National Food Policy Council to advise governments on food policy matters (for example, see VicHealth’s work on scoping the Food Policy Coalition). A National Food policy council should ensure a balance of stakeholders from civil society, industry and government, but be led by civil society representatives, with adequate funding and advisory powers.
4. A dedicated grant scheme for grassroots food organisations, initiatives and coalitions to build their capacity to participate in food system governance alongside more powerful (and better resourced) stakeholders (such as retailers and industry lobby groups).
5. Given the strong link between poverty and food insecurity (especially compounded by other factors such as race, gender, migration status, and housing disadvantage)^{xxxiii} trial a universal basic income scheme among sections of the Australian population known to be particularly food insecure. There are many examples worldwide to draw upon.
6. Local procurement policies could be designed for government agencies, hospitals, nursing homes, kindergartens, and other institutions serving food, while food could be grown at schools, retirement villages, libraries, and local council offices.

2.3 The impact of supply chain distribution on the cost and availability of food

The already uneven distribution of hunger and food poverty intensified during the COVID19 pandemic and recent widespread flooding.^{xxxiv} In Australia, as elsewhere, the beginning of COVID19 saw unprecedented levels of panic buying, which impacted food access, affordability and availability. The **vulnerability of Australia’s long food supply chains, based on ‘just in time’ food distribution through supermarkets, failed to provide food to consumers and created further disadvantage.**^{xxxv} Global food prices are higher now than they were during the 2008 food price crisis; in Australia, the cost of fresh food and overall grocery bills has almost doubled in the past two years.^{xxxvi} Prices are especially high in rural and remote Australia, which is widely attributed to difficulties in freighting foods over long distances and inefficiencies in supply chains servicing community grocery stores.^{xxxvii}

FAO monthly food price index in nominal terms

January 2005 to 2022



Data accessed: 4 February 2022

Chart: IFPRI • Source: FAO • Created with Datawrapper

Source: FAO Food Price Index data^{xxxviii}

However, **the past few years have also seen many positive examples of communities coming together to regain control over local food systems via short food supply chains** – such as food hubs, food box schemes, community supported agriculture, urban farms, and farmers’ markets. These alternative distribution models make vital contributions to food production, distribution and consumption practices that also protect vulnerable populations from food insecurity in times of shock or disaster^{xxxix, xl} and should be an important focus for food security reform aligned with sustainability goals^{xli}. **Strengthening local and regional food systems** – especially non-industrial systems using agroecology or regenerative methods - can be pursued through both market and non-market forms of short supply chains. These have strong potential to addressing the cost of food (economic, and environmental). For example:

- In community gardens, urban farms and home gardens, people can share, swap and barter with food, significantly reducing the cost of healthy local food^{xlii}. Home gardens are a key means to reduce vulnerability and increase self-sufficiency - during COVID19, for example^{xliii}.

- Cooperative models such as community markets, bulk-buying groups, wholesale shopping, and community supported agriculture can improve the affordability of healthy local food, ensure a fair pay for farmers and food workers.^{xliv}
- Shortening the distance that food travels between producers and consumers reduces CO2 emissions caused by transport (i.e. ‘food miles’), reduces fossil fuel dependency and respects ecological limits. Where short food chains also emphasise agroecological production methods (such as regenerative farming or organics) – as do many community-based food networks in Australia - they contribute positively to reducing chemical and fertiliser use, restoring biodiversity and recycling soil nutrients.^{xlv}
- Short food chain models can strengthen circular economies, going beyond marketing and ‘greenwashing’ to deepen the connection between consumers and producers. For example, improved food waste management practices - such as local composting hubs and the proliferation of closed-loop networks that help small businesses compost food waste and procure sustainable food from farmers - are increasingly being driven by local food enterprises. Over the medium to long term, they significantly reduce waste and landfill, improve soil health, save water, and sequester carbon.
- Growing food directly in institutional settings – such as schools, prisons, and hospitals – can help address the problem of food deserts, where low socio-economic areas cannot access healthy and sustainable food.
- Short food chains can provide co-benefits for social-ecological resilience. Localised networks demonstrate responsiveness (the capacity of the food system to respond to a crisis or pressure quickly), diversity (in institutions, skills, functions, ideas and actors), cohesion (relationships, networks and communication) and flexibility (adaptability, efficiency).^{xlvi}

Recommendations

1. Extend policies and programmes for non-marketised food provision (e.g. free breakfast programmes in schools).
2. Fund and extend education initiatives to help people grow food at home, and embed food systems education in national primary and secondary education curriculums.
3. Investigate directions for food charity reforms to shift away from a deficit model, to connect more closely with local food production-consumption networks, ensure dignity and culturally appropriate responses, in partnership with government and communities.
4. Joined-up planning to support localising supply chains: Town planning should prioritise food production on urban public land, reduce the regulatory burden for small and agroecological farmers in peri-urban, regional and rural locations, and increase funding for localised distribution networks.

2.4 The potential opportunities and threats of climate change on food production in Australia.

The current industrial food system is closely bound up with both the causes and effects of human-induced climate change. In Australia, agriculture accounts for 16% of greenhouse gas emissions,^{xlvii} and the IPCC has recently stated with high confidence that, “climate-related extremes have affected the productivity of all agricultural and fishery sectors, with negative consequences for food security and livelihoods”.^{xlviii} This was clearly demonstrated to Australians by the bushfires of 2019-20 and the floods of 2022, with both disasters impacting food production and supply. In 2022, 19% of food insecure households in Australia cited natural disasters as a contributing factor to their food insecurity.^{xlix} As the effects of climate change are expected to intensify over coming years,^l ‘business as usual’ is no longer an option - it is vital to take action now to build a sustainable food system in future.

Resilience – broadly defined as a system’s ability to absorb and adapt to shocks^{li}- has emerged as an important lens to assess sustainable and equitable food systems.^{lii,liii} Furthermore, it is widely argued that local food networks are integral to improving resilience.^{liv,lv} As such, **resilient food security policy must include a rapid shift towards localising food production, distribution and consumption, redirecting financial profits to benefit local communities and environments, and shifting governance processes to reflect broad civil society participation and empowerment.**

Our research suggests that it is important to analyse how local food systems react and adapt to a crisis, but also to consider how these provide a catalyst for wider systemic change. One important finding relates to the urgent need to ensure that young people are empowered in determining the future of food. Although the effects of climate change will disproportionately affect younger people, this sector of the population is also actively engaged in designing new models of food production, consumption and governance, intersecting strongly with movements for climate justice. Inclusiveness, diversity, decolonisation and wellbeing must be integrated into food-climate policymaking for food security outcomes that also ensure intergenerational equity.

Another key finding in our research points to the need to redress power imbalances around new technologies in food and agriculture. A growing body of research indicates the need for caution in over-relying on technological fixes for addressing complex social, ecological and economic aspects of food security (REFS). Writing of ‘sustainable intensification’ for example, Loos et al.^{lvi} caution that:

*[S]is likely to fail in improving food security if it continues to focus narrowly on food production ahead of other equally or more important variables that influence food security. Sustainable solutions for food security must be holistic and must address issues such as **food accessibility**. Wider consideration of issues related to **equitable distribution of food** and individual **empowerment** in the intensification decision process (distributive and procedural **justice**) is needed to put meaning back into the term “sustainable intensification.”*

While agricultural technologies in food production (particularly those designed to reduce food waste) will likely continue to be valuable in addressing the dual challenges of climate change and food security, our findings affirm that these should be developed with civil society input, and more strictly regulated privacy and data-sharing practices. Just as the ecological and nutritional impacts of new food technologies must be carefully weighed, questions such as who owns emerging agri-food technology, who benefits from its use, and who participates in decision-making must be debated publicly and transparently. Furthermore, many of

our participants agree that the continued high uptake of sustainable agricultural methods are gaining traction as viable alternatives to ‘business as usual’.

Finally, as previously mentioned, **governance is central to improving connections between building resilient local food systems, climate change adaptation and mitigation, and instigating a deeper process of social learning that can contribute to transforming food systems.**^{lvii} Transformation is only possible when actors can adapt their perceptions, criteria and strategies. This process of *adaptive governance*^{lviii} occurs best when actors at different scales share responsibility and are involved in diverse forms of participation and collaboration, which in turn contribute to greater cohesion, resilience, and responsiveness within food systems. In sum, we argue for the need for expanding resilience beyond ‘bounce back’ to also consider transformation of governance at the nexus of food and climate action.

Recommendations

1. The previously mentioned National food policy council, as well as any similar councils at the state or local level, should include dedicated ‘youth’ representatives.
2. Regulation to ensure transparency of agricultural technologies (particularly around the key question of data ownership), as well as support for community-owned technological platforms in food production and distribution (see for example the Open Food Network).
3. Transformation of existing infrastructure into tools for building community resilience – for example, community gardens could expand into education hubs for growing, seed swapping, etc.
4. A national soil rehabilitation programme to improve environmental biodiversity and resilience.
5. Increase support for local governments working with community food networks to co-design local food security plans – for example, by building on existing council Disaster Management Plans that reflect the importance of local food supply and distribution chains.

Conclusion: Why food security MUST address hunger, resilience and systems change

Australia's food system was already extremely vulnerable before COVID19. Ecological degradation from high-input, intensive mode agriculture is ongoing, land use pressures due to climate change and resource constraints are intensifying, as is corporate concentration, and food is wasted at an alarming rate. We know that those already most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change – due to poverty, gender, class, race and other factors – will be most affected by future crises. The pandemic revealed that:

The global food system is one constantly scrambling to patch the very cracks and weaknesses it reproduces ... The vulnerabilities and inequalities produced as part of business-as-usual in the global food system have been intensified and rendered newly visible by COVID-19, but this intensification has also shone new light on transformational possibilities.^{lix}

The evidence presented in this submission highlights the need to address more closely the structural inequalities that underpin food insecurity, vulnerability, disruption, and thus, resilience. We have argued that shorter food chains often stand in contrast to the long supply chains that currently dominate agriculture and food security in Australia. Strengthening community-led, local food initiatives can provide crucial solutions to hunger by also addressing food poverty, ecologically unsustainable practices, unequal access to healthy, affordable food, policy incoherence, and non-participatory governance.

Our research has revealed four important elements at the intersection of food security and more equitable food systems:

- Food security policies should **connect food with wider issues** such as housing, income, healthcare, gender, and Indigenous sovereignty. Addressing equitable food access goes hand-in-hand with poverty reduction, gender equity, improved health and wellbeing, quality education, affordable and clean energy – all requiring policy coherence and commitment to collaborative action.
- Food security (availability, access, utilisation, stability and agency) should be pursued within a **human rights framework**, based on legislating the *Right to Food* into national and state food policymaking, and a redesign of governance processes to facilitate human rights outcomes.
- Establishing a **National Food Policy Council** is urgent. This will ensure participatory food policy making where ordinary people can set the agenda, leading to significant changes in the way food is produced, distributed, and consumed. Ensuring the meaningful participation of civil society in food system decision-making requires innovative approaches to be developed at all levels, and for stronger government support through financing, education and accountability mechanisms.
- Food security policy must shift towards long-term and intersecting goals. The **UN Sustainable Development Goals** provide one example of an existing framework that connects 'Zero Hunger' with interconnected environmental, social, and economic shifts. Localising the SDGs in Australia requires major changes to food governance across multiple levels in the food system. For example, while food production within ecological boundaries will be actioned locally, this will be supported by wider shifts in agricultural policy, trade policy and land use planning at state and federal levels.

Contributing authors

Dr Kiah Smith is an ARC DECRA Senior Research Fellow at the University of Queensland, with expertise in food security, food justice, resilience, climate change, sustainable development and the political economy of food system transformation. She is the lead researcher on **Fair Food Futures** - part local initiative, and part national research project that aims to enable a more inclusive discussion about what a 'fair and just' food system should look like. The study used participatory workshops and interviews to explore grassroots visions for the future of food, and asked: *How can community food networks influence the kind of wider paradigm shift towards sustainability that the 2030 Agenda – and food justice - requires?*

Joanna Horton is a PhD candidate in the School of Social Science at the University of Queensland. Her research is focused on power and participation in Australian food systems governance, with a particular focus on civil society organisations.

Camille Freeman is a PHD candidate in the School of Social Science at the The University of Queensland. Her PhD focuses on local and alternative food systems, Covid-19, and ethical and sustainable consumption.

Through this research, we have found that there are many ways to practice food justice in Australia, and no single definition. From this, we have identified four future scenarios for transforming food systems that envisage (a) more equitable access to food for all, and a revised food charity model (The Long Table), (b) localising food systems through improved urban food planning (Fair Food in the City), (c) mobilising young people's climate action and supporting young farmers (Youth, food and climate action), and (d) ensuring that emerging agrifood technologies benefit the public good (Technology for the People).

See <https://fairfoodfutures.com> for more information.



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