

Food Security, Climate Disruption and Social Inequality

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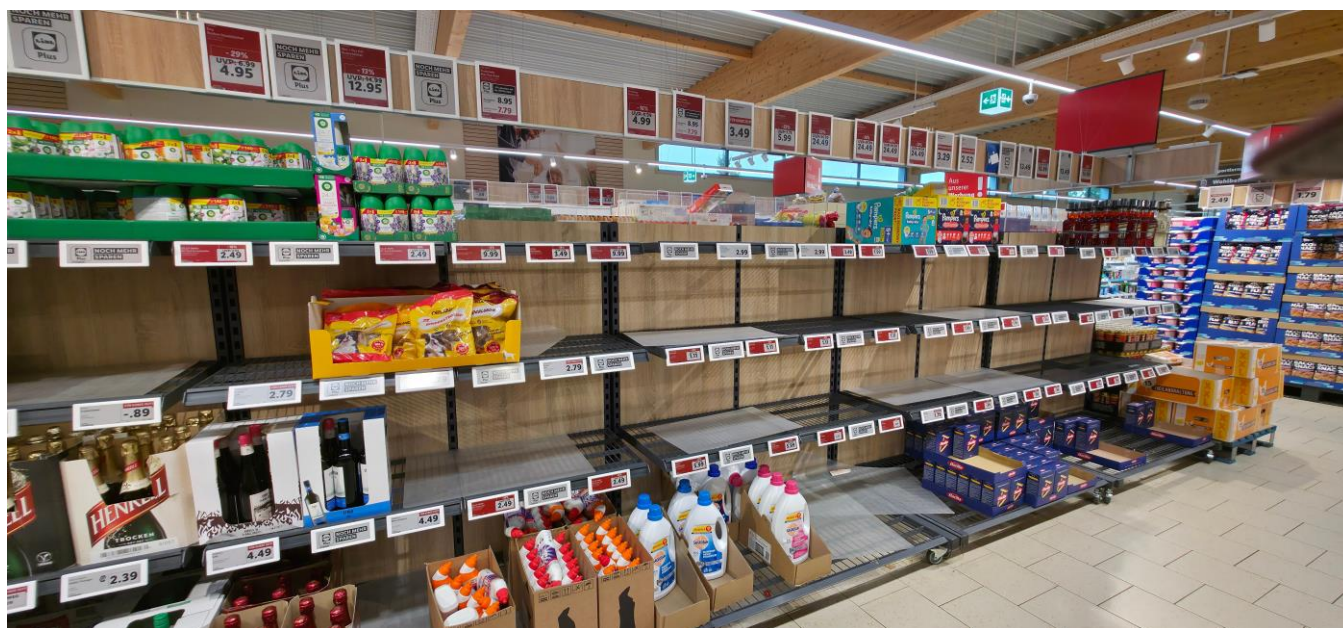
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Executive Summary

Australia produces enough food to sustain its population and exports a substantial share of its agricultural output. Yet food abundance at the national level does not guarantee that every household can access healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food. Estimates indicate that between 13.2 and 20 per cent of Australian households experience food insecurity. The risk is higher among low-income families, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people living in rural and remote communities, and other groups facing social and economic disadvantage (Kent, 2025; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

Climate disruption is making this challenge more urgent. Drought, floods, bushfires, extreme heat and unstable rainfall are already affecting food production and supply, including in the southern Murray–Darling Basin. At the same time, large quantities of food continue to be wasted. These pressures are not experienced equally: people with fewer financial, social or geographic resources are less able to absorb rising prices, shortages and interruptions to supply (Australian Climate Service, 2025).

This article considers food security through the lens of food justice. It examines how climate disruption and social inequality reinforce one another, reviews current policy settings and community led responses, and proposes practical steps towards a fairer and more resilient food system. HOPE Inc. is well placed to advocate for this transition by moving the public conversation beyond short term charity and towards systemic change that treats access to food as a matter of climate justice, ecological sustainability and social rights.



Introduction

Food justice means ensuring that everyone can access affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food, regardless of their income, location or background. Australia remains a long way from achieving that goal. More frequent and severe weather events are placing pressure on production and supply, while existing inequalities determine who bears the greatest burden when food becomes scarce or prices rise.

The Food and Agriculture Organization defines food security as a situation in which all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food for an active and healthy life (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 1996). This definition recognises that food security is not simply a question of how much food a country produces. It also depends on whether food is available, affordable, suitable and accessible to the people who need it.

Those with the fewest resources are often the first to lose access when climate related disruption occurs. Flooded roads can isolate rural communities; damaged supply routes can leave shelves empty; and low income households may be unable to afford sudden price increases. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities may also lose access to traditional foods while experiencing higher rates of diet related chronic illness and other climate compounded health effects (Singh-Peterson et al., 2026). This article explores these connections and asks how Australia can build a food system that is both climate resilient and socially just.

Climate Risks and Food Production

Climate risks are already disrupting Australian agriculture. Drought, flooding, bushfires, extreme heat, variable rainfall and water scarcity can reduce yields, damage infrastructure, interrupt transport and place additional pressure on farmers. The southern Murray–Darling Basin, one of Australia’s most important food producing regions, is particularly exposed to these interacting risks (Australian Climate Service, 2025).





Extreme heat and prolonged dry conditions can cause crops to wither, reduce production and strain both supply systems and farming communities (UNDRR, 2026). Floods and bushfires can compound those effects by damaging roads, storage facilities, equipment and productive land. The consequences extend beyond the farm gate: reduced supply and interrupted distribution can lead to higher prices and fewer choices for consumers.

A resilient food system therefore requires more than maintaining aggregate production. It must be able to withstand shocks, recover quickly and continue supplying diverse communities. This means protecting ecosystems, improving water and land management, supporting farmers to adapt, strengthening regional supply networks and reducing avoidable food waste.

Economic and Social Factors

Climate disruption does not occur in isolation. Poverty, housing stress, rising living costs, geographic isolation, disability and exposure to natural disasters all shape a person's ability to obtain food. When household budgets are already stretched, even a modest increase in food prices can force people to choose between groceries, housing, energy, transport and health care.

These pressures are intersectional. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may experience the loss of traditional foods and culturally important food practices alongside chronic illness, hunger and the broader effects of climate change. People in regional, rural and remote Australia can face long supply chains, limited retail competition and reduced access when roads or transport services are disrupted. Groups with fewer resources generally have less capacity to prepare for, adapt to and recover from climate shocks (Singh-Peterson et al., 2026).

Climate, agriculture, poverty, supply chains, food waste and health are therefore parts of the same system. Environmental damage can deepen social inequality, while inequality can restrict people's capacity to make sustainable choices or adapt to changing conditions. Addressing food insecurity requires policies that recognise these connections and support equitable local systems, regenerative practices and community control.

Policy Scan

Australian policy responses to food security are spread across several portfolios, each with different priorities. Agricultural policy has traditionally focused on production and exports. The development of Feeding Australia: A National Food Security Strategy creates an opportunity to take a broader approach, while tiered assistance and targeted support for small scale and Indigenous farmers could strengthen sustainability and resilience (Australian Government, 2026; Pradhan & Pant, 2026).

Public health and welfare policies often concentrate on immediate relief. Emergency food assistance remains important, but it cannot substitute for policies that address inadequate incomes, affordability and unequal access. Climate adaptation and regional development planning also need to integrate food systems more consistently, including the vulnerability of local production, transport, retail and community infrastructure.

The central policy gap is the absence of a coherent, rights based framework that connects food, health, climate, agriculture and social equity (Edith Cowan University Food Community, n.d.). Australia needs a comprehensive national food and nutrition strategy with clear objectives and measurable targets for fairness, health, sustainability and climate resilience. Such a strategy should define responsibilities across governments and sectors rather than leaving communities to navigate a fragmented system.

Community Case Studies

Community led initiatives demonstrate what a more resilient and democratic food system can look like. Cooperatives, food hubs, community gardens, urban agriculture, regenerative farming and Indigenous led programs can shorten supply chains, build local skills and keep more decision making within communities (Nelson et al., 2025).

Queensland's Gather + Grow initiative provides one example. It works with remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to strengthen local food production and supply networks. Its emphasis on community leadership recognises that lasting food security depends on local knowledge, culturally appropriate approaches and the ability of communities to shape the systems that affect them (Health and Wellbeing Queensland, 2023).





In Australian cities, community gardens can provide fresh produce while also creating opportunities for education, social connection and practical environmental action (Perth City Farm, 2021). Their contribution is not limited to the amount of food grown. They can build confidence, share knowledge and strengthen relationships that become particularly valuable during periods of disruption.

Traditional Aboriginal foods and food knowledge also demonstrate the importance of culturally appropriate food systems. Indigenous led approaches connect food with Country, culture, health and ecological stewardship. When communities control their own priorities, these initiatives can move beyond conventional charity by strengthening dignity, capability and social solidarity (TourHero, 2021). Community programs cannot resolve structural inequality on their own, but they offer important models that public policy can resource and extend.

HOPE Inc. (Australia) Advocacy Recommendations

HOPE Inc. can help frame food security as an issue of climate justice, ecological sustainability and social rights. Its advocacy should focus on the following priorities:

1. **Advocate for a national food security strategy.** Support a coordinated strategy that integrates health, climate, agriculture, sustainability and equity, with clear responsibilities and measurable targets.
2. **Promote food as a social right.** Support income-adequacy measures, dignified access models and consideration of a legislated right to food so that emergency relief is not treated as a substitute for systemic reform.
3. **Support regenerative and inclusive agriculture.** Call for targeted subsidies, training and other practical assistance for small-scale and Indigenous farmers, giving priority to approaches that restore ecosystems and strengthen resilience (Pradhan & Pant, 2026).
4. **Invest in local and regional food systems.** Encourage sustained funding for community led projects, urban agriculture, cooperatives, food hubs and regional production and distribution networks.
5. **Build cross-sector coalitions.** Bring governments, non-government organisations, researchers, communities and responsible businesses together to coordinate action and share knowledge.
6. **Strengthen education and adaptive capacity.** Promote accessible education on climate adaptation, sustainable farming, food waste and nutrition, designed with and for the communities it is intended to serve.
7. **Monitor outcomes and adapt policy.** Encourage transparent reporting and regular review so that policies respond to changing climate risks, food prices and patterns of inequality.

Conclusion

Food insecurity in Australia cannot be addressed through food production or emergency relief alone. It requires coordinated action on the connected pressures of climate disruption, ecological decline and social inequality. The people most exposed to food insecurity are often those with the least capacity to absorb rising costs, supply interruptions and extreme weather.

Australia can build a food system that supports environmental protection, health and community wellbeing by adopting equitable policies, strengthening resilient local systems and supporting sustainable farming practices. Community-led and Indigenous-led initiatives already show how shorter supply chains, shared knowledge and local control can improve both resilience and dignity.

HOPE Inc. can play a leading role by advocating for a coherent national strategy, a rights-based approach to food, stronger support for regenerative agriculture and sustained investment in community capacity. Food security should be understood not as an act of charity, but as a shared foundation for a fair, healthy and climate-resilient Australia.

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