Food Security, Climate Disruption and Social Inequality

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Executive Summary

Although Australia produces more food than it needs and exports a large share of its agricultural output, many households still struggle to access healthy and affordable food. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 13.2% of Australian households experienced food insecurity in 2023. The Foodbank Hunger Report 2025 found that 33% of households experienced food insecurity, including 20% facing severe food insecurity, in which people may have to skip meals, eat less, or go without food because they cannot afford enough. While these figures come from different surveys and are not directly comparable, they show that food insecurity remains a serious issue in Australia. Low-income households, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and people living in rural and remote areas may face even greater difficulties accessing affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

Climate disruption is adding to these challenges. Droughts, floods, bushfires, extreme heat and unpredictable rainfall can affect food production and supply across Australia. Food waste places further pressure on the system. The Australian Climate Service's 2025 climate risk assessment highlights risks to essential systems and communities, particularly those with fewer resources to cope with disruption.

This report examines food security through the lens of food justice, exploring how climate disruption and social inequality are connected. It looks at current policies, community-led initiatives and possible ways to build a fairer and more resilient food system. Beyond providing emergency food relief, the report highlights the importance of addressing the wider environmental and social factors that contribute to food insecurity. These issues also connect with Householders' Options to Protect the Environment (HOPE) Inc. (Australia)'s broader focus on environmental awareness and community education, particularly the relationship between environmental sustainability, social wellbeing and access to essential resources.



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Introduction

The idea of food justice is that all people, no matter their origin, place of residence or income level, should have access to affordable and nutritious food that meets their cultural requirements. Australia has yet to achieve this objective. Increasingly frequent and severe weather events are affecting food production and supply. The existing inequalities determine which groups suffer most when food becomes scarce or prices rise.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, food security means that everyone has reliable access to enough safe and nutritious food to live a healthy and active life. This indicates that food security is not merely a matter of how much a country produces; it also depends on whether the food is available, affordable, appropriate and accessible to those who need it.

When a climate-related disruption occurs, people with fewer resources may be among the first to lose access to supplies. Flooded roads can cut off rural communities, while damaged supply lines can leave shop shelves empty. Households on low incomes may struggle with sudden price increases. Climate-related pressures can also threaten access to traditional foods and affect the health and cultural practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, as discussed in research by Singh-Peterson and colleagues. This report examines how Australia could develop a fairer and more climate-resilient food system.

Food Risks and Food Production

Climate risks are already affecting agriculture in Australia. Extreme weather and changes in rainfall can affect crop production, damage roads and farming infrastructure, disrupt food transport and make it harder for farmers to maintain their livelihoods. The Australian Climate Service's national climate risk assessment identifies significant risks to Australia's natural and productive systems, including the Murray–Darling Basin.



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As highlighted in a UNDRR article on extreme heatwaves, extreme heat and drought can damage crops and place pressure on farmers. Floods and bushfires can make matters worse by damaging roads, storage facilities, machinery and productive land. The consequences reach beyond farms: reduced supply and disrupted distribution can leave consumers with fewer choices and higher prices.

A resilient food system needs to do more than maintain production. It must be able to withstand disruption, recover quickly and continue supplying food to different communities. Protecting ecosystems, improving land and water management, helping farmers adapt, strengthening regional supply networks and reducing avoidable food waste can all contribute.

Economic and Social Factors

Climate disruption is not an isolated occurrence; a person's ability to regularly obtain food is affected by a variety of factors, including poverty, housing difficulties, higher living costs, geographic isolation, disability, and exposure to natural disasters. A small increase in food prices could then force households with tight budgets to make hard choices about their purchases of groceries, housing, electricity, transportation, and health care.

These pressures are closely connected. Climate change, food insecurity and the loss of traditional food sources can affect the health and cultural practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. People in rural and remote areas may also face long supply chains, limited retail options and disrupted access when roads or transport services are affected. Those with fewer resources often face additional challenges in preparing for, adapting to and recovering from climate-related disruptions.

Food waste, supply chains, poverty, agriculture, climate change and health belong to one single system. If environmental damage increases social inequality, then inequality, in turn, makes it harder for people to cope with changing conditions or make sustainable choices. There is a need for policies which recognise these connections and actively support fair local systems, regenerative methods and community governance to combat food insecurity.

Policy Scan

Australian food security policy involves several departments with different responsibilities. Agricultural policy has traditionally focused on production and exports, while support for smaller producers and Indigenous-led initiatives could help improve resilience. The Australian Government is developing Feeding Australia: A National Food Security Strategy, with release planned for mid-2027. The strategy offers an opportunity to connect food production, affordability, health, climate resilience and equitable access.

Most public health and welfare policies focus on providing immediate relief. While emergency food aid is still necessary, it cannot take the place of measures which address low incomes, affordability and unequal access. Climate adaptation and regional development planning also need to give greater consideration to food systems, particularly the vulnerability of local food production, transport networks, retail services and community infrastructure.

Australia would benefit from a more coordinated approach that connects food security, climate change, agriculture and social equity. A national food and nutrition strategy could set clear goals for affordability, health, sustainability and climate resilience, with responsibilities shared across governments and other sectors rather than left to communities to manage alone.

Community case studies

Community-led projects offer practical examples of more locally connected food systems. Indigenous-led initiatives, food hubs, community gardens, urban agriculture and cooperatives can help develop local skills, strengthen supply networks and give communities a greater say in decisions about food. These approaches are also discussed in the 2025 Food System Horizons report.

Queensland's Gather + Grow initiative works with remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to support locally appropriate food systems and improve food access. Its approach emphasises community leadership, local knowledge and culturally appropriate solutions. Perth City Farm offers another example through its community gardening and education activities, which bring people together and help develop practical food-growing skills.



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Opportunities for Awareness and Advocacy

Addressing food insecurity requires cooperation across government, agriculture and local communities. With its focus on environmental awareness, education and advocacy, HOPE is well placed to contribute to discussions about the connections between food security, climate change and sustainability. The following suggestions highlight opportunities for HOPE to strengthen awareness, encourage community engagement and support broader advocacy efforts.

1. Raise awareness of the links between food insecurity, climate change, soil health and sustainable agriculture.
2. Advocate for a coordinated national food security strategy with clear responsibilities and measurable goals.
3. Encourage policies that improve affordable, dignified access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food, alongside essential emergency assistance.
4. Promote awareness of regenerative farming and Indigenous-led food initiatives, including opportunities for training, knowledge-sharing and community participation.
5. Highlight community gardens, cooperatives and urban food projects as examples of locally led approaches to improving food security.
6. Build connections with community organisations, Traditional Owners, researchers and local governments to share knowledge and support existing initiatives.
7. Share practical information about reducing food waste, composting, growing food and climate-resilient agriculture. Where appropriate, explore education about locally suitable native edible plants in partnership with Traditional Owners.
8. Review emerging evidence and policy developments to keep HOPE’s advocacy relevant to changing food security and climate risks.

Conclusion

Food insecurity in Australia cannot be addressed simply by producing more food or providing emergency aid. Climate disruption, environmental decline and social inequality also affect whether people can access nutritious food. Stronger local food systems, fairer policies and sustainable farming practices can help communities respond to rising costs and supply disruptions. Community-led and Indigenous-led initiatives also show the value of local knowledge, participation and shorter supply chains.

These findings highlight the importance of continued awareness, education and cooperation across different sectors. They also provide an opportunity for environmental organisations such as HOPE to contribute to broader conversations about food security and sustainability. Ultimately, food security goes beyond meeting immediate needs or providing emergency relief. It is not simply an act of charity, but a shared responsibility and an essential foundation for building a fairer, healthier and more climate-resilient Australia.

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