

“From hyper-globalisation to distributed localisation: A fair and resilient food system for Australia.”

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Presentation Outline

The supermarket sector in Australia is one expression of a ‘hyper-globalised’ food system which is increasingly characterised by tensions and vulnerabilities. These tensions and vulnerabilities are:

- **social**, as regards health, hunger, loss of farmers, and other structural inequalities;
- **political**, as regards the instability generated *inter alia* by rising food prices; and
- **environmental**, in terms of the capacity of the system to continue to sustain itself over the medium and long term, having regard *inter alia* to the excessive depletion of essential non-renewable resources such as oil and phosphates; the observed and anticipated impacts of non-linear climate change; and the accelerating loss of biodiversity.

This presentation will briefly focus on two sets of tensions and vulnerabilities in the Australian context – social and environmental - with reference to the role of the supermarkets. Due to the prevailing bi-partisan political ideology in this field, the current government and the apparent government-in-waiting take a ‘hands-off’ approach which has allowed, and will continue to allow, powerful economic actors to entrench their positions of market dominance further. The supermarket sector in Australia is one of the extreme outliers of market concentration in global agri-food systems, but it is hardly unique, with oligarchic market situations observable across multiple sectors at both national and global levels.

The remainder of the presentation will focus on the emergence of what are termed ‘creative food economies’, and consider their prospects for future development in the Australian context. The creative food economy sector is diverse, encompassing niche businesses catering to speciality and ethnic food preferences; ecologically-sound produce; and locally-grown and artisanal foods. It includes farmers markets, community-supported agriculture enterprises, multi-functional food hubs, food co-operatives, and food and agri-preneurs of all types.

Creative food economies are growing rapidly, both here and elsewhere, at rates exceeding 5% per annum. According to some estimates, farmers’ markets now account for as much as 7% of all fresh food sales in Australia. The growth in creative food economies is driven by an increasing loss of legitimacy of ‘big food’, partly as a consequence of numerous food safety scandals; and by the ability of this sector to respond to the social and ecological values of an informed and engaged citizenry.

The creative food economy is emerging Australia in the absence of any legislative assistance or meaningful resourcing at the State or Federal government levels. This contrasts with the United States, where the Local Food, Farms and Jobs Act was passed in Illinois in 2009, and where a bill of the same name was introduced into Congress this year, intended to further stimulate the growth of the local food economy.

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