

feature

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## *Food systems in Australia's food regime: Implications for the future*

The Coalition Government has promised to drastically change a suite of policies, guidelines and programs introduced during the 6-year Labor government. One of the many sustainability issues this government will have to rightfully govern over is the one of Australian food systems. Food systems are comprised of a series of activities ranging from production to consumption, and include the relationships between humans and ecosystems<sup>1</sup>. Embedded in food systems is high-level national agricultural policy, which informs state and regional policies and legislations. Food producers and consumers thus have to carry out their every day food related practices within the legal boundaries and guidelines set around food systems by national governments.

Australian agriculture is, at large, dominated by a productivist, output-oriented production model<sup>2</sup>. Food availability is confined to the retail outlets to which the industrially produced food is delivered. Through the development of a highly productive Australian food system during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Australia has positioned itself as a global leader in agricultural production.

The nature of this large-scale industrial agriculture, and the support it gets from industry and government, have left consumers disempowered to take political action and become more meaningfully involved in their food choices. Furthermore, the production-oriented food system has contributed to severe ecological degradation and the market control of flow of domestic commodities to consumers in a highly capitalist-driven system.

In light of the state of Australian food production and distribution, this article will pose two major food systems policy issues that the new Coalition government will be required to govern over. Firstly, I will discuss the inheritance of the previous government's National Food Plan, and how the agricultural vision has been carried forward. Secondly, the threat to Australian food sovereignty over the introduction of the Trans-Pacific Partnership will be discussed, with a focus on the further corporatisation of the Australian food system. For this article, I will use the conceptual framework of food regimes to situate the Australian food system and the discussion of the two selected issues the Coalition government will have to address.

## A FRAMEWORK FOR SITUATING AUSTRALIAN AGRICULTURE

Australian agricultural policy, largely supported by industry and government, has been driven by competitive productivism, focusing on maximising food output for international trade, and as such reduces the opportunities for alternate food systems to develop<sup>3</sup>. Regardless of which government governs the nation, a strong focus on technocratic, productivist agriculture that minimises opportunities for ecological conservation and provides opportunities for food retail diversity is a common trend in agricultural governance.

The advent of productivism in the food policy discourse needs to be placed in a historical context in order to understand where it has originated. The concept of food regimes, as proposed by Friedmann and McMichael<sup>4</sup> historically contextualise the development of the global food system since the industrial revolution. Through connecting periods of financial development to food production and consumption, food regimes are a useful tool to understand why dominant discourse behind agricultural policy has ended up where it is.

At its core, the food regimes approach argues that the emergence of neo-liberal trade policies under capitalism created opportunities for industrial agriculture to become the norm throughout the world<sup>5,6</sup>. Food regimes openly create an opportunity for politics and environmental thinking to coincide. They acknowledge the drivers behind accumulation of capital from agricultural commodities, and offer a critical space for ecological knowledge to intervene and critique the consequences of such accumulation. The three stages of food regimes are summarised in Table 1.<sup>7,8,9</sup>

*Table 1: The three stages of food regimes.*

Food Regime	Key Components	Defining Concepts
First Food Regime 1870s--1930s	Creation of national economies Colonialism and trade between Europe and colonised states Market Protectionism Developed Agriculture became a capitalist economic sector Agro-industrial relations developed	Capitalist growth
Second Food Regime: post- World War II 1947--1973	Post-Colonial production Intensified meat production Wide commodification of food Cold War food crisis Nation state driving production Introduction of the Green Revolution	Aid and Development Food Security, Production Oriented Concept
Third Food Regime: Corporate Food Regime 1973--present	Nation state loses control over production Elite consumerism Agricultural Intensification Productivist discourse dominates agriculture	Food Security: Access Oriented Concept Food Sovereignty Complementary Food Systems

## THE NATIONAL FOOD PLAN

The business-as-usual model from the NFP and the productivist mindset in Australia has been recently explored.<sup>10,11,12</sup> The NFP follows the prevalent trend in domestic food policies, which operate within competitive productivism framed by neoliberal ideologies<sup>13</sup>. The NFP was the product of extensive research and consultations on behalf of Gillard's Labor government. Throughout, the NFP has goals for growing exports, thriving industry, benefiting people and promoting sustainable food<sup>14</sup>. Through focusing on agricultural intensification, the NFP rapidly situates itself within the corporate food regime through a high presence of a productivist discourse and elite consumerism of staple commodities.

Take, for example, the notion of agricultural intensification. Australia aims to 'increase the value of agricultural exports by 45% by 2025', and 'increase productivity by 30%'. Conforming to this business as usual model, the NFP ignores the global food waste problem, and assumes that no social or behavioural change in society can occur. Furthermore, it ignores the severe impacts industrial food production has had on ecosystems.

In a country where land has been chronically cleared for the purpose of agricultural production, further promoting intensive agriculture demonstrates the lack of concern over habitat destruction. Australian landscapes have been significantly altered. Some 90% of native vegetation in temperate zone of Eastern

Australia has been cleared for farming and housing, and 50% of rainforests and 30% of woodlands have been removed for agricultural practices<sup>15</sup>. Whilst significantly contributing to Australia's global standing as an Agricultural exporter, these landscape changes have significantly affected native fauna and flora, some of which is now extinct or critically endangered. Despite these lessons, Australia persists in being a global Agricultural exporter. Through following this path, Australia will be unable to act as a global leader in ecologically sound food production.

Furthermore, another potentially damaging notion exists in the corporate food regime- the idea of elite consumerism. Indeed, Australia wastes almost \$8 billion worth of food every year, largely from unfinished meals or rotten food left in the fridge<sup>16</sup>. An important element of this figure is the fact that households with an average income of over \$100,000 waste more food. Australians are able to afford a wider variety of food available at retail outlets, only to waste a large portion of it.

The overconsumption of commodities is leading Australians to waste more money on food than double the amount of foreign aid we give globally. Aid is of relevance for Australian food systems, as the NFP also claims it will contribute to developing countries by 'helping farmers gain access to new agricultural technologies'. Such grandeur in food assistance by Australia thus aims to ensure that the productivist notions of agriculture are also exported and taken up by farmers in countries where there are severe governance, gender and political barriers preventing food production, which agricultural technologies will fail to address.



The inconsistency between a focus on growing exports and intensifying our food system while also caring about farmers internationally is further exacerbated by the second issue regarding food systems that the Coalition government will have to face. Whilst the NFP was a product of the previous government, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is a whole new issue that will profoundly affect Australian producers, consumers and international farmers in a way that is seldom being discussed in the media and general public.

## THE TRANS-PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP

The ambitious free trade deal being negotiated between 12 countries, amongst them Australia, Japan and the United States, will further liberalise trade and allow greater corporate influence in market product flows. Although ideal, in a sense, for consumers who want access to affordable global commodities, the neoliberal TPP will perpetuate unsustainable and unjust food systems through corporate control over food flows.

If Australia is genuinely concerned about improving the well-being of farmers internationally as it claims it is (not only through the National Food Plan, but also through the Australian Aid and ACIAR programs), then it must cohesively examine the politics which it is pursuing in international trade and the implications these have on such farmers. The TPP will likely create disadvantages in developing countries through fierce competition for low price of product and rapid production. This cycle of constant dependence on providing markets to generate income can force farmers in developing countries to shift from traditional farming practices to more intensive, productivist-oriented ones.

Smallholder farmers in many developing countries currently produce a wide variety of produce in mixed farming systems.<sup>17,18,19</sup> As such, they do not depend on a single commodity to sell to a market as a means of generating income. Thinking systemically, we can then begin to understand the implications of a highly consumerist society, like Australia, which expects cheap staple food commodities, which will be more freely traded through the TPP, and thus generate barriers for these smallholder farmers that are not part of this mainstream system.

The TPP has been developed in high secrecy between the governments involved<sup>20</sup>. The highly secluded negotiations further demonstrates that the deal is being developed by elites who want to further promote the neoliberal corporate food regime, which supports high value agricultural commodities. Small producers will become more excluded from markets as they will be unable to compete with artificially generated low prices, designed for the elite consumers.

For example, the TPP would significantly liberalise the agricultural system in Japan, opening up the door for Australian trade<sup>21</sup>. Japan is a country where 80% of the farms are classified as smallholder of 2 hectares or less. These small producers will be significantly affected by the cheap imports from other

countries, including Australia<sup>22</sup>. The TPP will thus create little barriers for large scale, intensive agriculture to take place, at the cost of smallholder farmers and the natural environment.

## WHAT IT MEANS FOR AUSTRALIANS

In an era where our political voice is confined to occasional ballot opportunities, it is unlikely that Australians will get a say in the future of Australian agricultural policy and food trade. There are likely to be ongoing ecological impacts stemming from further intensification of agriculture to increase the production of staple commodities. These commodities will serve to feed Australia, but also act as cheap commodities in countries trading with Australia. Along with the ecological costs, social inequity will continue to be promoted by liberalising trade, largely through enforced market exits on small producers.

Both major political parties in Australia have promoted a corporate food regime in Australia through focusing on the perpetual growth of agricultural commodity output. The NFP, engineered by the Labor Government, promoted the growth of the agricultural sector and the growth of trade in South-East Asia. Further to this, the new Coalition government is likely to sign a TPP which will liberalise trade between countries and promote competitive low prices of staple commodities. Both of these policies are indicative of a discourse that reasserts the existing corporate food regime.

Given that high level agricultural policy and trade is unlikely to promote radically different agricultural systems, it will be up to small scale producers and consumers to generate new food systems. In doing so, producers and consumers can grow and buy food with ecological and social justice principles in mind. This will require deeper understandings in society of the importance of knowing where and how food is produced, and a critical examination of agricultural value chains in the Australian market systems. Given the forces that are pushing towards the further liberalisation of agriculture in Australia, informal economies and support networks between producers and consumers in Australia will act as a meaningful contribution towards generating a new food regime.

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## *The Way of the Future!*

As much as we like our print-copy zine (it's printed on recycled paper with veggie inks), we have decided to move more of the action to our new website! The website will become the host for publication of all types of submissions—whatever you, our readers and writers, deem to be the most cutting-edge, important, and interesting topics. As long as it pertains to sustainable development, the natural environment and humans, we're keen to receive your writings. This will ensure a greater flow of student and non-student writings and wider readership, and will make up the content of a bi-annual printed 'best-of' ambiente zine.

Submission guidelines are the same, we are accepting three types of submissions:

### FEATURE ARTICLES:

1,000 - 1,500 words, preferably based upon primary academic research.

### INFORMED OPINION PIECES:

600 - 800 words, something which you feel strongly about and have a relatively good base of knowledge on.

### CREATIVE PIECES:

Drawings, poetry, short stories, comics, photographs, you name it. Video submissions (less than 5 minutes) will also be considered for the website.

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