



# Regenerative Supermarkets for a New Era of Socio-Ecological Risk

Douglas K. Bardsley<sup>1</sup> · Michelle Phillipov<sup>2</sup> · Hoa Thi Dieu Nguyen<sup>1</sup> · Georgia Kehagias<sup>3</sup>

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## Abstract

Supermarkets increasingly dominate food systems. They are the primary influence on food supply chains that are failing to enable sustainable outcomes or deliver affordable food during acute or prolonged crises. In Australia, the dominant food retail model neither fully accounts for risk, thereby contributing to rising food insecurity, nor ensures socially or ecologically sustainable farming systems. The limitations of food systems dominated by modern supermarkets reflect the broader reality that humanity is entering a new era of socio-ecological risk. Recognition of the emerging risk society raises questions about how supermarkets can evolve to guide sustainable outcomes for the food system. Our interdisciplinary review suggests that to mitigate risk, supermarkets must strengthen key structural elements of food systems to support food security and secure food by prioritizing sovereign food security, supporting local farmers, addressing concerns across the supply chain, and reinforcing sustainable agroecosystems. Alternative supermarket systems offer components of potential solutions, suggesting that a reflexive system of community action, regulation, and financial incentives could help supermarkets adopt new approaches that regenerate the social, ecological, and economic elements of food systems for strong sustainability and to account for future risks.

**Keywords** Supermarkets · Food security · Risk · Climate change · Sustainability · Australia

## Introduction

Supermarkets play a key role in modern food systems. Increasingly, their market power shapes the structure of food systems, not just consumer access to food. While corporate concentration in the retail sector is common across the OECD, Australia has one of the least diverse grocery

retail industries. In 2022–23, just two supermarkets – Coles and Woolworths supermarkets – controlled 57.3% of the food and grocery market and wielded significant instrumental, structural, and discursive power over the Australian food system (ACCC 2024c; Merrett, 2020; Pulker et al., 2018). With nearly two-thirds of Australians' food retail expenditure spent in supermarkets and grocery stores (Department of Agriculture, 2014), this situation presents an important case study of supermarkets' roles in supporting sustainable outcomes amid rising global environmental risks.

Supermarkets have come under increasing public scrutiny amid contemporary cost-of-living and food insecurity crises, as well as supply chain and farm viability risks, all of which pose significant challenges to their established roles. Rising food insecurity across Australia has fueled distrust in the dominant supermarket chains, raising questions among the media, consumers, and governments about their ability to provide high-quality, nutritious food that is accessible to all Australians while also returning value to farmers (ABC, 2024; Chalmers et al., 2024; IPSOS Public Affairs, 2024; Nichols, 2024). Beyond those immediate concerns, the environmental crisis and the need for food systems to transform to become more resilient to external shocks raise

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✉ Douglas K. Bardsley  
douglas.bardsley@adelaide.edu.au

Michelle Phillipov  
michelle.phillipov@adelaide.edu.au

Hoa Thi Dieu Nguyen  
htd.nguyen11@gmail.com

Georgia Kehagias  
georgia.kehagias@adelaide.edu.au

<sup>1</sup> School of Society and Culture, Adelaide University, Adelaide, Australia

<sup>2</sup> School of Communication, Media and Journalism, Adelaide University, Adelaide, Australia

<sup>3</sup> School of Civil Engineering and Construction Management, Adelaide University, Adelaide, Australia

further questions about supermarkets' ability to support sustainable transitions in agro-ecosystems and associated supply chains (Devin & Richards, 2018; Goulding et al., 2020; Pearson et al., 2014).

Climate change poses particular threats to the corporate supermarkets' business model, increasing costs and disrupting supply chains. In a context of endogenous and exogenous risks that together define a new 'risk society' (Beck, 1992), we suggest that supermarkets are emerging as key intermediaries between the public and experiences of rural and environmental change (MacFadyen et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2010). In fact, we hypothesize that without prioritizing customer and community engagement and addressing the scope of contemporary and future environmental risk, supermarkets – as key institutions bridging the gap between the people and the socio-ecosystems from which they draw their food – will struggle to maintain their business model or support the ecologically sustainable transition (Abdelwahed et al., 2022; Bardsley & Rogers, 2010). We critically review Australian supermarkets' current activities to examine how they could become regenerative actors in the food system. In doing so, we explore the implications of risk in contemporary food systems, with a focus on the Australian context but with applications in other concentrated retail markets where highly urbanized populations have limited direct connections to, and knowledge of, the food systems on which they rely (Dixon & Richards, 2016; Dumbrell et al., 2024).

Endogenous and exogenous risks stem from the design and structure of modern systems. We draw on Beck (1992), who charted the conundrum of societal risk generated by the success of modern technologies and institutions during what he termed a 'first modernity'. He noted that as modern systems become dominant, homogenized, and interconnected, they create new risks that cannot be prepared for or mitigated without systemic change. A new form of modern society – a second modernity or 'risk society' – is increasingly defined by risk "induced and introduced by modernisation itself" (Beck, 1992, p. 21). Without reflexive decision-making informed by a thorough understanding of those risks, systems are more likely to fail catastrophically, leading to socio-ecological degradation and suffering. Thus, responses will need to be grounded in sophisticated, iterative knowledge of places, systems, and people to guide targeted outcomes while confronting powerful interests that would constrain just, sustainable change (Beck et al., 2003; Feindt & Weiland, 2018). Key structural elements of food systems are also at risk as globalization degrades local systems, increases dependency, and undermines resilience to external shocks, most recently through supply chain impacts generated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Clapp & Moseley, 2020; Davis et al., 2021; Puma et al., 2015). Fortunately, we do not need to wait for failed systems to facilitate reflexive

reforms. Critical analyses of modern institutions in relation to emerging systemic risks can generate knowledge to help evolve new, adaptive systems that will tolerate shocks and facilitate sustainable outcomes (Bardsley & Knierim, 2020; Kaiser et al., 2021).

We present a critical interdisciplinary review of contemporary supermarkets. Drawing on academic and policy debates, we examine how risks to food producers and consumers are generated by the supermarket-dominated food system and consider the potential roles of what we call "regenerative supermarkets" in supporting strong, sustainable outcomes. Such a transformation would aim not only at food security but also at stronger socio-ecological outcomes linked to changes in agroecosystems that enable food security (Carolan, 2013). Transforming the roles of key commercial, profit-driven institutions to prioritize regeneration over value extraction is not a simple task (Fath et al., 2019; Guan & Zhao, 2024). We use the term 'regenerative' broadly to describe approaches that reorganize socio-ecosystems to achieve strong, sustainable ecological, social, and economic outcomes, recognizing that these outcomes are deeply interconnected and take multiple forms (Buckton et al., 2023; Ruggerio, 2021). The concept of regenerative systems is now being applied across a range of domains, from landscape design (Lyle, 1996) and agriculture (Giller et al., 2021; Loring, 2022) to tourism, transport, and architecture (Bellato et al., 2023; Busby et al., 2011; Gibbons, 2020; Pearson et al., 2024). A regenerative transition away from unsustainable or failing food production systems, or even from weaker sustainable forms that focus largely on economic goals, will require not only new organizational and technological approaches but also new institutional forms. We do not attempt an exhaustive review here, but in developing our arguments, we ask: Is it possible to imagine alternative models for the supermarket, given its hegemony in food systems?

## The Changing Role of Supermarkets in the Australian Food System

Due to their ability to provide food and other goods to people relatively cheaply and efficiently, supermarkets came to dominate food purchasing in the Global North after the end of World War II (Bailey, 2020; Goodman & Watts, 1994), and have since expanded their physical presence on main streets and in shopping centers throughout the developed world (Merrett, 2020). Facilitated by globalization, supermarket corporations rely on economies of scale to keep processing and distribution costs low while maintaining affordable retail prices for consumers. Consequently, by offering a variety of products under one roof, supermarkets

normalize distant and complex food supply chains and consumer expectations of secure, affordable access to food (Burch & Lawrence, 2007; O’Kane & Pamphilon, 2020).

As supermarkets expand their global reach, mainstream food systems face significant challenges. Capital is driving a divergence between super-productivity, which exploits massive economies of scale, and multifunctional agroecosystems, which reflect a range of social and ecological goals for agriculture (Barrett et al., 2022; Reardon et al., 2007; Song et al., 2020; Wilson & Burton, 2015). Super-productivity in supermarkets is typified by efficiency gains from large stores, online purchases, home deliveries, self-checkouts, and sophisticated corporate structures and financial control over extensive supply chains (Alexander & Veliyath, 1993; Burch & Lawrence, 2009; Mackay & Perkins, 2019; Roche & Argent, 2015; Thomas-Francois & Somogyi, 2023). Alternative multifunctional food systems – including specialty stores, farmers markets, direct farmgate sales, and community-supported agriculture, among others – counter supermarket dominance through direct and alternative markets that appeal to values of sustainability, quality, and locality (Berti & Mulligan, 2016; Fielke & Bardsley, 2013; Goodman et al., 2012; Renting et al., 2009). Yet these systems are considered alternatives to supermarket hegemony and, due to the financial and time costs involved, rarely compete with supermarkets as a primary food source for most people (Canal Vieira et al., 2021; Dixon & Isaacs, 2012). Consequently, alternative systems bypass most farmers and consumers, and low-cost, processed convenience foods often fill the gap (Marchese et al., 2022).

In addition to the drive for alternatives, the viability of the traditional supermarket model is increasingly questioned. Rapid global food price inflation in 2008 and 2011, and during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, exposed the corporate food retail structure’s susceptibility to supply chain shocks (Clapp & Moseley, 2020; Kaiser et al., 2021; McMichael, 2009; O’Hara & Toussaint, 2021). Systemic modeling of future climate change impacts on food systems suggests that such major shocks will become increasingly common (Hultgren et al., 2025; Kornhuber et al., 2023). Yet even small disruptions along complex global supply chains quickly compound, driving food price inflation and marginalizing farmers (Christoplos & Pain, 2015). There is growing critical awareness that the power held by supermarkets fails to mitigate risk, serving corporate interests at the expense of other stakeholders, with some calling for government powers to force their division to increase competition (Barrett, 2024; Burch et al., 2013; The Greens, 2025). That pressure has led to political support for an inquiry into the Australian supermarket sector to examine pricing practices, including the relationship among farmgate, wholesale, and retail prices (ACCC 2024a; Maguire & Chandler, 2024).

While it is possible to question whether private companies should support a holistic, sustainable transition in a neoliberal, capitalist society, supermarkets, by positioning themselves as hegemonic actors within contemporary food systems, become more than just profitable corporations. The power they wield is not only about achieving market share; supermarkets also exert considerable discursive power as “food authorities” to shape consumers’ lifestyles and food knowledge (Dixon, 2007). Supermarkets provide efficiencies for consumers, yet are seen to be failing to respond effectively to social and environmental crises (Clapp & Moseley, 2020; Smith & Lawrence, 2022). As evidence of global food insecurity and climate change becomes clearer, we outline the emerging challenges for supermarkets to represent strong sustainability for just food outcomes, focusing on issues for farmers and consumers, as well as contemporary and future environmental management needs. We then discuss key elements of a more regenerative supermarket form that would promote goals of intra- and intergenerational equity and socio-ecological sustainability.

## Economic, Social, and Ecological Critiques

### Farmers

The power of the Coles and Woolworths supermarket duopoly shapes the actions of Australian farmers and food producers. Market forces, rather than government policy interventions, drive supermarkets to set high standards for their produce to maintain reputations for reliability among consumers (Freebairn, 2018). These standards, together with the growth of own-brand products, place increasing, and often debilitating, pressure on farmers to limit farmgate prices to compete with other suppliers (Richards et al., 2013). The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC 2008) concluded that major supermarkets had significant power to set the terms of trade, with many farmers having few alternative outlets. Although the major supermarkets present low prices primarily in the consumer interest (Phillipov & Loyer, 2019), they have a range of food system consequences. The rise of supermarket own-brands – lower-priced products competing directly with branded manufacturers’ products – strengthens supermarkets’ bargaining position with farmers (Burch & Lawrence, 2007). For example, in 2011, when Coles dropped the price of its own-brand milk to \$AU1 per liter to attract customers (a move Woolworths quickly followed), Queensland farmers received a farmgate price of just 53 cents per liter for milk that cost 52 cents to produce, undermining farm profitability and reducing farm numbers (Anderson, 2004; Burch et al., 2013).

Generic brands are driving “a form of agricultural restructuring” that increases vertical integration in the food system, enabling flexible sourcing that puts downward pressure on wholesale and farmgate prices while eroding ties between producers and consumers by reducing information about food provenance (Konefal et al., 2005; Richards et al., 2013). These strategies enable supermarkets to maintain record-high profits, including during the COVID-19 pandemic (Clapp & Fuchs, 2009; O’Hara et al., 2021) and the ongoing post-COVID cost-of-living crisis (ACCC, 2025; Maguire & Chandler, 2024; Nichols, 2024). Woolworths Limited generated net profits of \$AU1.17 billion in 2019–20, \$AU2.07 billion in 2020–21, and \$AU7.93 billion in 2021–22, the latter a period of rapid food price inflation (Woolworths Group 2024). However, generic branding also undermines food sovereignty, the right of local people to control their own food systems, which will be key to a regenerative transformation (Wittman, 2011).

Although supermarkets argue that price increases reflect rising costs, higher prices on supermarket shelves are not translating into higher returns for farmers (e.g., Hough, 2022). When power is concentrated within a supply chain, the lack of competition forces suppliers into unfavorable business relationships (Peel et al., 2019; Richards et al., 2013). The number of Australian broadacre and dairy farms has declined by 33% between 1999 and 2000 and 2022–23 (ABARES 2025). As farmers face more variable environmental conditions, including drought, floods, and other climate extremes, the added economic pressures from labor and resource input costs, combined with a lack of retail competition, have proven detrimental to farmers’ mental health (Batterham et al., 2022; Daghigh Yazd et al., 2019). In recent years, 45% and 65% of farmers have experienced depression and anxiety, respectively, while an overwhelming 45% have had thoughts of self-harm or suicide (National Farmers Federation, 2023). Moreover, while earlier research found that farmers are the most trusted part of the food chain (Henderson et al., 2011), the ‘social licence’ to farm in Australia is under threat as producers are increasingly expected to simultaneously achieve social and ecological outcomes, such as reducing natural resource exploitation, conserving biodiversity, and reducing food waste and pollution (Hampton et al., 2020; Williams & Martin, 2011). In such a production context, consumers are also experiencing new forms of risk.

## Consumers

The Australian supermarket model is being challenged not only by producers in the supply chain but also by consumers (ACCC 2024c). As a highly productive agricultural nation and net food exporter, Australia has often been portrayed

as free from food insecurity (ABARES 2025). Increasingly, however, there is a contradiction between the post-industrial, liberalized nation’s conceptualization of food as primarily an economic commodity (DAFF 2025, National Farmers Federation 2019) and contemporary holistic definitions of food security, which recognize Australians struggling to maintain stable access to “safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences” (FAO, 1996). A 2024 Foodbank Report found that 3.4 million households in Australia, or 32%, experienced moderate to severe food insecurity over the preceding year (IPSOS Public Affairs, 2024). More than half of food-insecure households have someone in paid work, leading many to attribute the situation to structural changes across society, even as supermarkets continue to generate large corporate profits (Maguire & Chandler, 2024; Nichols, 2024). Indeed, Coles and Woolworths were recently sanctioned over their “Prices Dropped” and “Down Down” promotions, which the ACCC (2024b) concluded were misleading to consumers because items could be priced the same or higher than previously offered.

Australian supermarkets are responding by supporting food rescue and hunger-relief nonprofits such as Foodbank (2024), OzHarvest (2024), and SecondBite (2024). These nonprofits have attracted widespread corporate, government, and community support (e.g., Coles, 2024), for their caring humanitarian response to the food crisis. However, this support also underscores the structural inability to ensure individual agency in food access for 30% of Australian households (IPSOS Public Affairs, 2024; Williams et al., 2024), thereby highlighting the scope of the structural food security crisis (Rothall & Leckie, 2024). The worst food security outcomes in Australia are found in remote Indigenous communities (Bowden, 2020; Fredericks & Bradfield, 2021), as reflected in recent Australian Government policy to subsidize nutritious foods in remote community stores (Evans, 2025). The rise of the Australian productivist food system coincided with the late stages of European colonization in the late eighteenth century, and many of the ‘efficiencies’ of the modern agricultural project have, from the beginning, been associated with the colonial dispossession of Indigenous communities from their countries and traditional land management systems (Bardsley & Knierim, 2020; Mayes, 2018; Watson, 2014). As truth-telling becomes vital to reconciling past acts of land theft legitimized by colonial processes, supermarkets will also need to play a role in the new era of reconciliation by representing the cultural importance of Indigenous foods and land management to consumers while prioritizing food security within marginalized communities (Bradfield, 2024).

The separation of humanity from nature has been shown to diminish care for the environment and its protection, a

trend that will become increasingly problematic as climate change worsens (Barrable & Booth, 2022). Supermarkets have been understood as “non-places,” where abundant produce is available year-round, regardless of seasonality, and many find grocery shopping “alienating” (Augé, 2020; O’Kane & Pamphilon, 2020). However, the universality of product access is becoming harder for supermarkets to sustain as disruptive weather events affect supply. Climate change risks to agriculture are projected to significantly affect the production quality and quantity of many key commodities (Hasegawa et al., 2021). Consumers need to understand these challenges to support their food systems, yet 83% of Australian consumers have described their relationship with farming as ‘distant’ or ‘non-existent’ (National Farmers Federation, 2019). For many people living in urban areas, their only connection to food is through supermarkets – where traces of soil are largely erased, and there is little promotion of eating in harmony with agricultural and natural cycles (Régner et al., 2022; Turner & Hope, 2014). Separating consumers from where and how their food is grown also contributes to the concentration of supermarket power by normalizing corporations’ position as controllers of the journey from farm to fork (Pulker et al., 2018), reinforcing consumers’ reliance on supermarkets (Hofman-Bergholm, 2022; O’Kane & Pamphilon, 2020).

## Ecological Impacts

The agricultural practices required to sustain supermarketized food systems have well-documented environmental consequences. Deforestation, water waste, agricultural chemical runoff, and greenhouse gas emissions indicate that modern agriculture is implicated in the industrial processes driving the environmental crisis (Bardsley & Knierim, 2020; Ehrenfeld, 2005; Panchasara et al., 2021; Steffen et al., 2015). Available arable land for increasing food production is limited, making regenerative agricultural practices necessary to boost yields in situ (Alexanderson et al., 2024; Gosnell et al., 2019). While the elements of the regenerative supermarket will touch on multiple ecological factors, from transport to packaging, two crucial issues we focus on here are food waste and biodiversity loss in relation to supermarket-led industrial food systems.

Supermarket standards for produce quality, size, and appearance drive industrial production methods that degrade the environment and diminish agro-ecological complexity (Hamblin, 2009; Watson, 2014). Supermarkets’ strict visual and quality standards contribute to substantial food waste (Brancoli et al., 2017). Supermarkets discard much food before sale as quality declines, and food waste also results from over-harvesting, a practice farmers use to ensure they meet order quantities (Devin & Richards, 2018). Farmers

are often required to sign “non-binding” contracts, meaning supermarkets are not obliged to purchase the produce they order (Morris, 2024). As a result, crops may be wasted if growers cannot find alternative buyers at short notice (Phillipov, 2016), and if strict standards are not met, produce may be “returned to growers at growers’ cost” (Lyons, 2007). With about 14% of the world’s food discarded or degraded before retail, and all forms of food waste contributing about 8–10% of greenhouse gas emissions (FAO, 2019), this issue has a considerable impact on socio-ecosystems.

Agriculture has been the primary driver of natural habitat loss, contributing to greenhouse gas emissions and the global biodiversity crisis. Rising food demand will continue to drive this trend unless the world develops alternative farming models (Benton et al., 2021). In Australia, agriculture accounts for about 18% of national greenhouse gas emissions, and most of the vital natural habitat for critically endangered species outside reserve areas is associated with agroecosystems (DCCEEW, 2025a; Ward et al., 2025). This means that national goals to reduce emissions and broaden conservation opportunities will need to transform agroecosystems. Historically, modern agriculture has also eroded agrobiodiversity, with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimating a 75% reduction in crop diversity globally and only 150 of an estimated 300,000 edible plant species widely cultivated (FAO, 1999). Declining crop diversity threatens environmental resilience to variable production conditions, and conserving diversity could help strengthen food system resilience worldwide (Bardsley, 2003; Khoury et al., 2022). Although supermarkets have normalized expectations of abundant, reliable products at all times, corporate power has reduced the diversity of local agricultural production systems and the variety of produce available globally (Burch & Lawrence, 2007; Humphery, 1998). Even in Australia, where little fresh food is imported, the country’s size and climatic diversity allow supermarkets to source products from multiple places, requiring careful storage of perishables and increasing energy consumption while often bypassing local suppliers (Burek & Nutter, 2020).

Supermarkets’ governance of food systems is framed by private corporate standards and third-party certifications for environmental management and animal welfare, which shift financial and moral responsibilities onto farmers (Wang & Sugimoto, 2022). The lack of state oversight has given supermarkets significant control over, and the ability to define the terms of, what constitutes ‘sustainability’ in the contemporary food system (Fuchs et al., 2011), with standards often weakened to keep costs down and volume high (Lewis & Huber, 2015; Parker et al., 2017). The supermarket duopoly often “claim[s] virtuous and responsible behaviours”, while real outcomes for waste or biodiversity

in food systems can be neglected (Devin & Richards, 2018). Such greenwashing undermines sustainable food production and distribution, thereby hindering broader long-term food security (Carolan, 2013). Because of their hegemonic role and capacity to frame what is possible within agroecosystems, the market power of supermarkets will need to be increasingly activated to support a sustainable transition, requiring new types of regenerative supermarkets to evolve from the older, first-modernity forms they represent now.

## Regenerative Supermarkets in the Risk Society

In the previous sections, we have highlighted emerging challenges arising from the ubiquitous success of supermarkets in the first modernity— an era of expansion, relative abundance, and limited acknowledgment of the environmental crisis. The normalization of supermarkets as the primary intermediaries between people and their food has enabled efficient supply chains and significant profits. Yet, applying Beck's (1992) framework on risk, the very success of supermarketized agricultural systems generates future risk as new thresholds are reached in socio-ecosystems. Over the last decade, supermarket profits have grown even as food insecurity has increased, the ecological crisis has become clearer, and the profitability of agriculture at the farmgate has come under increasing pressure. The system is failing to create the social space that would lead to community demands for reform (Habermas, 1989), resulting in disconnections between deliberations on systemic risk across society and the emerging challenges of a second modernity, which will require complex reflexive responses to be implemented in a timely manner to address the failures and opportunities of conventional thought and action (Beck et al., 2003; Beck & Grande, 2010). Supermarkets need to maintain their viability and efficiency, but rather than exploiting social and ecological degradation to promote profitability, supermarkets have opportunities to evolve to ensure that food production systems are sustainable ecologically, culturally, and nutritionally (Clapp & Moseley, 2020; Sassi, 2018), and that responses to social and environmental crises are integrated into methods of producing and accessing food.

Regenerative supermarkets need to prioritize socio-ecological outcomes, which pose significant challenges for businesses established and managed to generate corporate profits. For that reason, supermarkets are unlikely to shift to regenerative forms unless they generate commercial value. While new policy settings to incentivize good actors and punish poor behavior will need to evolve over time, there are already opportunities to learn from experiments in food retail that incorporate elements of regenerative tools.

Regeneration will take many forms to respond to the raft of challenges posed by the failing modern food system, so we structure the discussion here around several ideas emerging from alternative supermarket models. While no single case study appears truly regenerative, the examples enable us to assemble elements of a regenerative model.

### Discount Grocery Chains: ALDI

German-based discount supermarket ALDI is disrupting the Coles/Woolworths duopoly in Australia, accounting for about 10% of the food retail market (Senate Select Committee on Supermarket Prices, 2024). It is the cheapest supermarket for an average basket of household goods, lowering operating costs by offering a limited range of products, predominantly private-label items, through a simplified shelving system (ALDI, 2025; Rafferty, 2024; Spanjaard & Freeman, 2023). ALDI's streamlined supply chains, promotion of directly sourced, seasonal products from known local suppliers, and compliance with the European Union's increased environmental, social, and governance (ESG) regulations (EC, 2024) have enabled the supermarket chain to position itself as a greener alternative to the duopoly. While strict supermarket control over supply chains is generally not in farmers' interests, ALDI works closely with a small number of suppliers on a limited product range to maintain key elements of responsibility throughout the supply chain. For example, ALDI is leading in its commitment to deforestation-free beef (ALDI, 2024a; Greenpeace Australia Pacific, 2024) and in its targets to cut plastic use and promote sustainable supplier packaging (ALDI, 2024b; Australian Marine Conservation Society and Boomerang Alliance, 2024).

### Independent Supermarket Chains: Drakes, Foodland

Consistently outperforming major supermarkets in customer satisfaction (Clemons, 2021), Australian independent supermarket chains such as Drakes (2025) and Foodland (2025) are genuine competitors to the duopoly in their home state of South Australia. Both chains leverage economies of scale while focusing on local sourcing from South Australian suppliers. Because the stores operate as independent franchises, individual stores or small groups of stores can purchase in smaller volumes, supporting a diversity of local alternative producers and reducing transport distances and costs. Drakes has been an early adopter of blockchain technology for provenance and traceability, including proof of fair trade, organic certification, and the use of reused or recycled components in products sourced (Karhu et al., 2022). Foodland supermarkets were the first in South Australia to introduce compostable fresh produce and carry bags, as well

as a reusable container scheme to reduce single-use plastics (Adelaide's Finest, 2025). Several Foodland stores have been awarded 'World's Best Supermarket' awards, with the 2024 winner emphasizing ecological sustainability alongside the needs, tastes, and lifestyles of local consumers from one of Adelaide's most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas (ABS, 2023; Laverty, 2024).

### European Cooperative Supermarkets

European cooperative supermarkets work to directly and transparently support community links to agro-ecosystems by empowering farmers and other suppliers to be decision-makers throughout the supply chain (Giacche & Retiere, 2019; Hingley et al., 2011). For example, in Norway, where four major retail chains control 99% of the food retail market, farmers possess "greater bargaining strength" in a co-operative supply environment supported by greater state involvement in regulating standards and prices (Richards et al., 2013). In Switzerland, the grocery retail model is dominated by cooperative supermarkets and Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiatives, which aim to promote cultural identities and landscapes while supporting a range of alternative, small-scale producers to work together to generate scale and present their products to a national Swiss market (Bardsley & Bardsley, 2014; Geissberger & Chapman, 2023). Corporate cooperative supermarkets COOP and Migros exploit the efficiencies of the supermarket model while reinvesting capital into supply chains that emphasize regional produce and keep consumer prices low. As Gutmann and Niedworok (2024, 14) note, "their streamlined branding and operations make them all but indistinguishable from corporations to the average consumer."

Such community-led models enable traceability across the supply chain to better address problems with greenwashing and can strengthen relationships between urban and rural communities (McEachern & Warnaby, 2019). Although a small number of individual co-operative stores remain in Australia (such as Barossa Fresh Coop (2025) in South Australia, see Balnave and Patmore 2015), the model was seen to require additional consumer time and labor investment and fell victim to the prioritization of corporate efficiencies in the 1960s (Patmore et al., 2024). In the Swiss case, cooperatives continue to support sustainable and sovereign supply chains alongside direct state payments for agriculture that lead to ecological outcomes (Huber et al., 2024). The state, mountain associations, and supermarkets work together to promote sustainability and family farming while reinforcing links between consumers, their sovereign food sources, and, more broadly, their communities, places, and ecosystems.

### Organic Supermarkets

New specialty supermarkets are evolving to support specific forms of production. The organic supermarket model, which limits the use of artificial chemicals, is driven in part by the perception that conventional Western agricultural practices have damaging environmental, social, and health impacts. While organic produce is commonly found at local farmers' markets and stand-alone organic stores, conventional supermarkets have stocked organic products since the 1980s, with Tesco and Sainsbury among the first retailers in the UK (Lyons, 2007). Although Australians have not had the same level of organic food uptake as in Europe, there is a large area under organic production, which contributes \$AU2.6 billion annually, with 13% growth since 2012 (Australian Organic 2021; Lyons, 2007). However, the perception of food greenwashing remains a challenge (Carlisle, 2015; Haigh & Liszka, 2024): Australia still lacks a domestic regulatory framework for organic products, and some 31% of consumers state that they have been misled due to inconsistent certification (Australian Organic, 2021; Willer et al., 2024).

Organic products sell at a premium, and until they are made accessible to consumers beyond the elite or dedicated, they will continue to bypass most households. Coles and Woolworths have deepened their organic offerings by developing their own brands, Coles Brand Organic and Macro Wholefoods Market Organic, to make organic produce more affordable, accessible, convenient, and visible to consumers. In Germany, the Alnatura (2025) supermarket has, since 1984, built an authentic business model around organic products, seeking to normalize environmental sustainability for consumers rather than simply supporting organic production as an alternative to the dominant system (Haigh & Liszka, 2024). The roles of organic producers are well known, and recent work by Sadeghi-Esfahlani and Bitsch (2023, p. 95) notes that "food retailers serve as the most important point of contact between producers and consumers; they are uniquely positioned to promote sustainability." That transition has been enabled by Germany's largest consumption of organic products after the USA (Willer et al., 2024). In Australia, some important steps are being taken to develop a deeper understanding of the organic industry, with 62% of consumers now recognizing the Australian Certified Organic Bud logo used for export certification, while 39% will not purchase an organic product unless it displays the mark (Australian Organic, 2021).

## Conclusion: Toward a Regenerative Supermarket System

A wave of ecological risk is breaking over society. As a result, structural and market demands on supermarket-led food systems are increasingly misaligned with goals of food security, resilient farming communities, and sustainable ecosystems. We do not suggest abandoning the supermarket model. The qualities of efficiency, convenience, and accessibility that characterize the modern supermarket will still be needed as new thresholds in socio-ecological risks become more evident. Yet supermarkets will need to evolve to become key players in driving sustainable transitions to prepare for risk. Already, their core role of ensuring people have access to sufficient, nutritious food is being challenged in Australia, the United States, and parts of Europe, as a growing minority of the community is bypassed by conventional food systems. Beyond that role, however, stronger ecological sustainability must be promoted through the food system to ensure resilient farming communities and appropriate responses to increasingly complex environmental issues, including climate change, natural and agricultural biodiversity, food waste, pollution, and natural resource extraction, while maintaining economic viability along supply chains. Such regenerative supermarkets could help lead socio-ecological resilience and adaptation in a manner that models and legitimizes pathways to transformation for other modern institutions in an era of risk. Deliberations on the future of institutions such as supermarkets can help create space for a broader debate on emerging socio-ecological risks across society.

There are pathways to a just, sustainable transition. Market rationality does not prioritize socio-ecological needs such as risk mitigation, so the transition to commercial regenerative supermarkets will not be simple. While consumer pressure is evolving slowly, we have highlighted examples of more significant steps toward strong sustainability, involving stronger alignment between the ‘normal’ activities of businesses and the sustainability goals of consumers, producers, and government. To become regenerative actors, supermarkets will need policy guidance to make greater use of their power to promote new ecologies of production, distribution, community, and consumption. Moral suasion, state and community involvement, and market mechanisms that tie consumer support to strong sustainability will all be needed to usher supermarkets through the transition. Clearly, the current reliance on a small number of dominant supermarkets to achieve those goals in Australia is itself risky, so opportunities to diversify by supporting new actors will be vital for resilient, sovereign food systems.

Policy interventions could increase regulatory and financial benefits for supermarkets by aligning their commercial

actions with environmental policy and explicitly accounting for systemic risks in their supply chains. In partial response to the crisis, a “Social Supermarket Program” was recently implemented in South Australia to help “people experiencing food insecurity to access low-cost groceries in a dignified, retail-style environment” (DHS 2026). As corporate social responsibility, including environmental responsibility, increasingly becomes an expectation of consumers and shareholders alike (Devin & Richards, 2018), opportunities are emerging to align corporate and values-based agendas. Mechanisms to empower supermarkets to support broader structural environmental policy reforms, such as greenhouse gas emissions reduction, adaptation to climate uncertainty, and the conservation of biodiversity on farms, could be strengthened through alignment with national environmental policy, such as the Climate Change, Nature Repair, or Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Acts (DCCEEW, 2025b). Further research into the policy to drive the necessary reforms is needed, but as our analysis suggests, there will likely not be a single model for regenerative supermarkets. Rather, the evolution of a sustainable food sector will be a learning process of reflexive management in an emerging risk society.

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## Declarations

**Ethical approval** No primary research was conducted for this review paper, so no research participants were involved. The submitted work is our original work and has not been published elsewhere in any form or language (partially or in full). The manuscript has not been submitted to another journal for simultaneous consideration. We believe that the information has been presented clearly, honestly, and without fabrication, falsification, or inappropriate data manipulation to support our arguments. No data, text, or theories by others are presented as if they were our own, and we believe that proper acknowledgments have been given to all works used in the development of the article.

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