

Reversing the “Livestock Revolution”

Improving Animal Welfare and Food Security

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Introduction

This paper will demonstrate how relatively easy shifts in policy and personal action, geared toward reducing global meat consumption, can decrease the unnecessary suffering of billions of animals, improve regional economic health, and increase global food security.

It is written for an informed but non-expert audience, with an animal welfare and African emphasis, to provide an overview of the connections between hunger, meat, and factory farming. The primary focus is on describing the factors responsible for the drastic increases in global meat consumption – known as the “livestock revolution” – and the problems with U.S. and other global policymaker responses to it.

The paper will close with some insights on how African nations are affected, the ways in which they are positioned to make positive change, and meaningful actions that individuals and organizations can implement.

The Problem

Meat consumption is increasing at unprecedented rates, predicted by the United Nations in their 2006 “Livestock’s Long Shadow” report to double over 50 years (2000-2050). Factory farming, which is responsible for some of the worst atrocities against animals, is likewise increasing at unprecedented rates... both fueling the increases in meat consumption and increasing in response it.

While not a panacea, reducing meat consumption is a powerful piece of the puzzle offering tremendous benefits to some of the world’s most intractable problems. The United Nations and other top level institutions acknowledge the benefits of reduced meat consumption for improving animal welfare, protecting the environment and increasing food security, yet they avoid

advocating reduced consumption (as even part of their solution sets) because they deem it “demand-driven.”

The good news is that “demand” is not fixed and factory farms do not need to be the solution. Demand is socially-constructed and can be altered by political will, public education, and personal change.

By understanding the multitude of benefits that accompany reduced meat consumption, animal advocates increase their success rates. Issues such as combating hunger, reducing greenhouse gases, and preserving scarce resources are strong motivators for policymakers. These concerns are especially pronounced in Africa where many nations endure high rates of hunger and are disproportionately vulnerable to environmental disruptions.

What is the “Livestock Revolution?”

The term “livestock revolution” was coined in 1999 by U.S. think tank the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in their report “Livestock to 2020.” It is used as a short-hand to describe the unprecedented increases in global meat consumption due to (1) increases in the per-capita consumption in low-middle income countries, which are (2) a very large population block when taken as a whole, that (3) have high birth rates relative to higher-income countries.

Spelled out in more detail, as economies improve in low-middle income countries, more meat and other animal products are consumed. It should be noted that low-middle income countries do not include the lowest-income countries, commonly referred to as “least developed countries” (LCDs), which include 33 African countries (most in sub-Saharan Africa) and account for approximately one billion people.

As a block, the low-middle income countries account for approximately half of the world’s current population (three billion people). To this large base population, add the relatively high birth rates that result in even more people consuming more resource-intensive animal products. The combination of these three forces creates a multiplier effect resulting in drastic increases in a short time-frame and leading to increased factory farming and the plethora of problems that accompany it.

“Livestock Revolution” – A Misnomer

The term “livestock revolution” belies the destructive consequences and unbalanced treatment of the issues. It is widely understood that because meat consumption is exceptionally resource-intensive that feeding an increasingly populous world with dwindling natural resources will require drastic change. The environmental pollution of factory farming is also widely acknowledged and of grave concern.

Despite these concerns and the large-scale improvements that could result with even modest per-capita reductions in overconsuming countries, the focus is on low-middle income countries. The “livestock revolution” focuses on “increases” to meat consumption (to the exclusion of current rates of overconsumption), thus discouraging critical examination of high consuming countries. The excessive per-capita and aggregate consumption in high-income countries are overlooked because their largely saturated markets are considered “stable.”

The responses look to meet the demand with minimal harm; however minimizing harm within the proposed solutions is grossly inadequate and destructive. Drastic, immediate change is called for, yet the benefits of reduced meat consumption are acknowledged then readily dismissed. Generally speaking, the benefits to eating less meat are not included as even a partial response to predicted food security and environmental problems.

Meeting Demand - Technology and Population Control

The popular responses to the increased demand for meat focus on advancing technology to increase yield (supply) and, to a lesser extent, reducing population growth to decrease demand.

Relying on technology to increase yield is risky as both its potential and negative externalities are unknown. Furthermore, technology is inherently controlled by those already with an abundance of power and advantages. Technological advances are profit-driven and often result in greater disparities, which further undermine smaller, traditional farming systems. Exceptions may occur for altruistic reasons, but those pale in comparison to the norm and altruistic (or seemingly altruistic) assistance may lead to dependence on foreign technology or have other negative consequences.

Relying on slowing population growth is also problematic. This type of solution is overwhelming focused on low-middle income countries (with higher birth rates) and not higher-income countries (with higher consumption rates). Population control can be a political landmine and has a history of abuse. Population control, which may be high-pressured or even forced, is distinct from population planning, which gives greater control to women and strives to benefit their immediate social and familial concerns.

Examination of the effects of population growth is important for many reasons, but it should be considered in conjunction with the disparity in per-capita consumption rates. Countries with high per-capita consumption rates must take responsibility for and ameliorate their disproportionate use of global resources as a critical and necessary part of the equation.

Reduced Meat Consumption – The Neglected Variable

Institutions such as IFPRI acknowledge that the planet has the resources to feed a population of nine billion people on a plant-based diet, but they dismiss those advocating the benefits of eating less meat as “well-meaning” and “naïve.” This is dangerous oversight as high-income countries have an abundance of nutritious plant-based options and even modest reductions in meat consumption would have far-reaching benefits.

Reducing meat consumption is also relatively easy compared to creating multiple technological leaps or controlling birthrates. Furthermore, it is an option that is accessible to individuals, so change can take place at the grassroots (bottom-up), while still benefiting from policies that create change (top-down). It also does not compete with other efforts as it is part of a comprehensive response, not a replacement.

While there continues to be strong resistance, efforts to reduce meat consumption are beginning to take hold, mostly for global warming reasons. This is a good start that improves chances for policies that redirect subsidies and bolster smaller farming operations, public education campaigns (such as Meatless Mondays), and institutional change that increases both the availability and interest in plant-based options. Reversing the overconsumption of resource-intensive and greenhouse gas producing livestock should be a top priority. The more countries that opt to move away from factory farming and the overconsumption of meat, the more others will follow.

Reducing Meat Consumption Reduces Factory Farming

Increased global meat consumption is fueling increased factory farming and displacing smaller, more traditional farming operations that can not compete with large agribusiness corporations. The most immediate and widely available option to reduce the numbers of factory farms, thus reducing animal suffering, is to reduce meat consumption. This is especially important in high-income countries like the U.S. and Europe that have high per-capita overconsumption, but it is also important for countries with lower per-capita consumption rates, so that problems can be prevented before they become entrenched.

To maintain an accurate perspective, it is helpful to remember that when advocating for reduced meat consumption, the work is to slow, stall, or reverse the unprecedented increases. The hope is to at least slow the increase, but what is most needed is to “reverse the trend” so that global meat consumption actually declines. At the current rate, even holding global meat consumption steady (which accounts for 57 billion land animals slaughtered each year for food), would be a tremendous step in the right direction.

Factory Farms Undermine Animal Welfare

From an animal welfare perspective, few things are worse than factory farms. For animals confined in factory farms, there is no quality of life or relief from misery. While intensive methods may be applied to cattle, the greatest use and greatest increases of factory farming systems are for producing pig and poultry products, including eggs.

To illustrate, the most intensively farmed egg-laying hens are kept in huge warehouses, often confining tens of thousands of birds in one building. The birds are tightly crowded inside cages so small that they can not spread their wings. These wire cages are stacked on top of each other so that the waste of the birds above falls onto the birds below. Similarly, intensively farmed pigs are confined indoors inside crates so narrow that they can not move forward, backward, or turn-around.

These brief examples illustrate just a fraction of the immense suffering endured by factory farmed animals as “standard operating procedure.” Although there is a burgeoning movement to outlaw some of the most egregious practices, factory farming is legal throughout the world. The methods are not disputed by the industry and they are not isolated incidents. These

processes are not intentionally cruel, they are “merely” profit-and-loss decisions as animals are considered “units” of production and not sentient beings.

The U.S. and UN have mixed responses about factory farms. The need to support smaller farms and reduce the environmental costs of factory farms is acknowledged. But many of the problems with factory farms are externalized so they are often considered an efficient and a viable option for meeting the world’s increased demand for animal products.

Putting People First Helps Animals

To be clear, the recommendation here is not for Africa to uniformly eliminate meat and prioritize animal welfare over human welfare. In calorie-deficient areas or those using subsistence farming and/or medium-sized mixed systems, animal agriculture may genuinely increase food security and help families. In these smaller systems that are especially prevalent in sub-Saharan nations, farm animals often provide tangible benefits such as draft power, fertilizer, and economic security.

By contrast, factory farms do not provide any of these benefits. Intensively confined animals do not provide draft power, their waste is out of proportion to the land so it becomes poisonous, and economic security is undermined as smaller farming systems and subsistence farmers are displaced.

Policymakers and social justice advocates do not need to choose between animal or human welfare. The same farming systems and diet recommendations that help people thrive are the same ones that reduce animal suffering. It is not a matter of choosing to protect animals to the detriment of people.

Examining True Costs

The recommendation, then, is to critically examine the true costs and benefits of meat consumption in a particular area and to understand the ways in which protecting traditional farming and maximizing consumption of plant-based foods can better feed a community.

While factory farming is touted by agribusiness and many policymakers as an efficient method of production, they overlook that meat is an inherently inefficient converter of food and

environmental resources. Meat requires the intake of considerably more calories and protein than is produced. Exceptions to this may be when cattle are grazed on non-arable land or animals are used in small numbers for subsistence and/or mixed farming, but these methods are also not problem-free.

As a general rule, feeding people directly is a better and more efficient use of nutrients and calories than cycling the food through animals to produce meat. Plant-based foods provide all the essential nutrients, protein and iron needed. Plant-based foods also contain high levels of beneficial fiber (which meat lacks) and are void of the excessive saturated fats that underlie many “diseases of affluence” (heart disease, cancer, and stroke) suffered by high consumption countries.

Increasing Food Supply - Decreasing Prices

From an economic perspective, reducing global meat consumption further improves food security by increasing the supply of food staples, thus lowering prices and increasing buying power.

It is basic supply-and-demand. When supply is relatively inelastic (fixed), high demand (as through resource-intensive meat consumption) leads to high prices. Thus, meat consumption increases the price of food staples because the demand is high for non-grazing, cereal-fed animals. In essence, the economically-advantaged bid away food staples for animal feed instead of using that food to directly nourish human populations.

A recent example shows the power of this supply-and-demand model very clearly. When food resources were used to create more biofuels, the increased demand for staple foods drastically increased food prices. The result was a food crisis with skyrocketing hunger and hunger-related deaths.

The food resources used in biofuels are miniscule compared to the food resources used in meat production. As hunger is a multi-faceted problem, reducing global meat consumption will not eliminate it, but the increased supply of food staples will provide significant relief by decreasing local prices and providing for more equitable food distribution.

Choosing Plant-Based Options

Given a choice between producing or importing plant-based products or animal products, the costs and benefits should be weighed carefully. A large quantity and wide-variety of iron-rich and protein-rich plant-based foods may be available for the same costs as much smaller quantities of animal-based products.

Each geographic sector needs to analyze whether resources are being used to feed local people or if they are being exported. Factory farming systems are promoted as better ways to provide for those in need, but the systems often benefit the business interests (foreign and national), while hurting the local economies and people.

African countries, even with some of the lowest levels of meat consumption, tend to be net importers of meat despite the rise of meat and feed exports, as is the case with Ethiopia. Both imports and exports need to be examined to determine which types of food provide the greatest nutritional benefits. Working with trade balances can be tricky math with countries both importing and exporting similar products, but regardless of the import/export trade balances, reducing meat consumption leads to a better use of resources and better treatment of animals.

Africa Positioned to Create Change

While the U.S. can and should reduce meat consumption to set an important example by for the overconsuming high-income countries, African nations are well-positioned to set an example as countries with low per-capita meat consumption.

Western policymakers, think tanks, and even NGOs generally take it as a “truth” that African nations need more meat and a “duty” to provide it. Even animal welfare organizations, such as Compassion in World Farming, that advocate for drastic decreases in meat consumption in the middle-high per capita consumption countries, advocate for increases to Africa in order to make the global distribution more equitable and the farming methods more humane.

Given the vast regional differences, each locality is best able to decide if they genuinely need more meat or if plant-based options better serve the nutritional and sustainable farming needs of their community. By intentionally opting for more plant-based protein, iron and nutrient-rich options and not blindly following the trend to increase meat consumption, Africa can reject the Western model and methods before agribusiness interests become firmly entrenched.

And even if modest meat increases are chosen, Africa can still take an early stand against the dangers of factory farming. By intentionally rejecting intensive farming and excessive meat consumption, African countries can better feed their people and have greater moral authority in speaking against factory farms on behalf of animals, people, and the environment. With enough support and motivation, African activists and policymakers can even work to reverse the recent surge in factory farming operations.

Conclusion

This paper has shown the urgent need to reverse the “livestock revolution.” For animals, the consequence of reducing meat consumption is clear... billions can be saved from factory farm atrocities. Reducing meat consumption also takes pressure off the agricultural systems allowing more traditional farming methods to improve conditions for farm animals and result in fewer animals being used for food.

Since those in power do not prioritize animal welfare, the topics presented in this paper better enable animal advocates to speak to issues that elicit greater concern. Having basic knowledge on a wide-range of benefits also empowers animal advocates in their local outreach. Individuals and community leaders alike can make a difference even if they primarily work on other types of issues. Personal changes such as minimizing meat consumption, supporting traditional farming and pro-nutrition initiatives, and becoming a community role model do not compete with other objectives. Instead these efforts reinforce the connections between the various forms of animal protection and social justice advocacy.

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About Dawn Moncrief and A Well-Fed World

Dawn Moncrief is the founder and executive director of **A Well-Fed World** (www.AWFW.org). Based in Washington, DC, AFWW is a non-governmental organization that works with national and international policymakers, social justice leaders, and grassroots organizations to reduce global meat consumption as a necessary component of food security, public health, and global warming solutions. AFWW also provides grants to individuals and organizations, especially those in low-income countries or with limited resources, to further our shared mission of reducing global meat consumption.

Before founding AFWW, Dawn Moncrief spent eight years with the Farm Animal Reform Movement. As executive director, she created coalition-building campaigns linking farm animal protection with hunger, environmental, and sustainable farming causes. She also co-organized national animal protection conferences that strengthened activism and increased cooperation among diverse animal protection and social justice sectors.