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Reconciling Climate and Livestock Production? FAOs latest State of Food and Agriculture report

The 2009 State of Food and Agriculture report was delayed for several months. After the disaster of Copenhagen, one could have expected it to provide the necessary guidance to policy changes for saving the Planet from further increases of greenhouse gases emitted from livestock that are estimated to be higher than from the transport sector. But FAO's suggestions are comparable to rearranging deckchairs on the Titanic, **Susanne Gura** writes.

Particularly, the Worldwatch Institute had come up with new figures correcting FAO's 18% to 51% of anthropogenic CO₂ equivalents originating from livestock, and making a number of proposals on how to reduce them fast. The fact that methane has a half life of only 7 to 8 years triggers the idea of eating less meat to allow time for rendering the energy and transport sectors more sustainable.

* Remedies remain rather general

FAO, however, promotes business as usual. Industrial livestock is already providing most of the world's animal products and expected to grow further due to growing populations and changing food habits. FAO relies on projections that growing demand will lead to increasing livestock populations, with the global population of cattle increasing from 1.5 billion to 2.6 billion and that of goats and sheep from 1.7 billion to 2.7 billion between 2000 and 2050 (p 24). How will this growth not impact on climate, water, soil, biodiversity? The remedies suggested by FAO remain rather general.

Several media have picked a sentence from the concluding chapter: "Market-based policies, such as taxes and fees for natural-

resource use, should cause producers to internalize the costs of environmental damages caused by livestock production." (p 99) The Financial Times of 19 February 2010 is even hearing a call for reform of the livestock industry, although at this general level, the suggestions are not new.

But a tax reform would be unsuitable, according to an economist in a German Parliament hearing of 21 February. Taxes, for example on nitrogen emissions, would not affect consumption since producers would move to neighbouring countries. Similarly, the Dutch cap on the number of pig fattening places due to the excessive nitrogen load in soil and water has made Dutch farmers to invest in Poland and Eastern Germany, as well as increasing piglet production. Earlier, the German organic association Bioland had suggested waiving the Value Added Tax reduction for food (7 % instead of 19%) in the case of meat.

Various taxes and fee instruments are not discussed in the FAO report, which however, calls for more governance. It wrongly deplores that the livestock revolution has taken place in an institutional void (foreword), wrong because abundant financial (e.g. tax waivers) and regulatory support has rendered the industry "dynamic". In-

dustry development was clearly fostered with subsidies and development aid, which are hardly mentioned, and figures not provided. Regulatory support is particularly given in the case of exporting industries, which are described in detail.

*** How to reduce infection risks?**

Animal diseases are a problem growing with the animal numbers kept in narrow conditions. In spite of bio-security, their untrained immune systems fail to deal successfully with infections. To reduce infection risks, FAO recommends relocation of factory farms in order to avoid movements of people and animals between traditional and modern systems (p 86). Local breeds usually carry pathogens while they often do not suffer from diseases. Culling of local poultry in large numbers to fight Avian Flu has been disastrous for food security, poverty alleviation, and for genetic resources conservation; the recommendation a few years after Avian Influenza is to avoid “excessive culling” (p 90).

The increasing numbers and expansion of epidemics due to industrial livestock – on which a good collection of economic data are provided – lead to demands for more public funding for research and insurance to compensate for the risk of sick animals. In Germany, the taxpayer provides for half of the insurance financing, and the industry demands the same in other countries. On the other hand, veterinary services have been privatized, and independent veterinary advice is difficult to obtain since it is increasingly part of the contract by which farmers buy all inputs from a company. Whether such arrangements serve the farmer and the public is questionable but not discussed in the report.

Contract production is discussed at length in spite of a lack of data. Contracts are registered in only one country (the USA), and contracts in most countries carry a clause that the content of the contract is secret. Unfair risk sharing and resulting

indebtedness have been reported by others than FAO. The FAO report describes contract production as the approach by which smallholders should be integrated into markets, but this approach shows “mixed results” (p 49). It should be added that multinational food companies increasingly source raw milk (as well as fish if aquaculture is looked at) from smallholders. Factory farms as in pig and poultry however, usually lead to an exit of peasants from the sector. They require ever increasing investments in bio-security to prevent infections.

Animal welfare, one of the largest unresolved problems of the livestock industry, is merely addressed in one box (p 93).

*** A way to food security and poverty reduction?**

With regard to food security and poverty reduction FAO recommends measures (i) enhancing the ability of smallholders to take advantage of the opportunities offered by growth in the sector; (ii) protecting the poorest households for whom livestock serve as a crucial safety net; and (iii) enacting broader rural development policies to ease the transition of many livestock keepers out of the sector.

FAO points to the need to accompany livestock industry development by rural development, but no examples follow. 70% of the urban and rural poor keep livestock; this should be “borne in mind” (p 5), and “at a minimum, the safety-net function played by livestock must not be destroyed without compensation or without the creation of alternative social safety nets” (p 95). Left without examples that are not prohibitive with regard to costs, many policymakers may be lost. With regard to the smallholders that may take advantage of growth opportunities, the FAO recommendations look rather hollow as factory farms are often set up by investors as soon as a certain size is needed to be competi-

tive. Where sector growth is fast, the competitive farm size is growing fast as well.

Link >>>

<http://www.fao.org/docrep/012/i0680e/i0680e00.htm>

The very question why mankind on Planet Earth would need to increase the number of industrial livestock when existing number already exceed the carrying capacity, is not sufficiently answered. Rightly, “Small quantities of animal-based foods can provide essential nutrients for maternal health and the physical and mental development of small children” (p 40); meat provides iron and zinc in an easily digestible (bio-available) form. The global production of protein rich plant foods like legumes is currently at loss, partly due to competition for land and water for agro-fuels, and – perversely – for livestock feed. FAO’s report would have better addressed this problem of replacing climate efficient plant proteins by far less climate efficient animal proteins.

But quite in contrary, “the livestock sector has enormous potential to contribute to climate change mitigation.” (p 100) Instead of proposing how to reduce the excessive animal numbers, FAO suggests “new and extensive initiatives at the national and international levels, including: the promotion of research on and development of new mitigation technologies; effective and enhanced means for financing livestock activities; deploying, diffusing and transferring technologies to mitigate GHG emissions; and enhanced capacities to monitor, report and verify emissions from livestock production” (p 100). Such solutions are far away, theoretical, and prohibitive with regard to costs.

Reference:

* FAO: *The State of Food and Agriculture 2009: Livestock in the balance*, 176 pp, Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, Rome 2009. Available at: www.fao.org