

Headline: The plant-based solution to hunger

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Berlin—The way we eat in the industrialized world is unhealthy, unjust and unsustainable. Far too much of the meat we consume is produced under questionable ecological, ethical and social conditions. And now our industrial model for meat production is being exported to the global south—especially India and China—where meat consumption is rising among these countries' emerging middle classes.

Worldwide, 300 million tons of meat are produced each year, and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that the annual amount will increase to 455 million tons by 2050 if demand continues to grow at the current rate. Such large amounts of meat can be produced only on an industrial scale, and at high social, political and ecological costs.

Meat production is a tremendously inefficient use of agricultural land, because considerably more plant-based food is needed to feed livestock than we would need to feed ourselves directly through a plant-based diet. For example, producing one kilogram of chicken meat, pork or beef requires 1.6, three and eight kg of animal feed, respectively. This pits farmers and animal-feed producers against one another in a fierce competition for land.

Meanwhile, the production of soy—the world's most important animal-feed grain—rose from 130 million tons in 1996 to 270 million tons in 2015, with 80 percent of output going to meat production, especially in China (70 million tons) and Europe (31 million tons). This expansion of soy agriculture, as a result of the growing demand for meat, is driving up land values. Consequently, in the global south, common land is being privatized, rainforests are being destroyed to make room for agricultural cultivation, and international agribusinesses are expropriating the land that one-third of the world's people still rely on for their livelihoods.

Animal-feed production, and the intensive cultivation of agricultural land that it requires, is not only destroying ecosystems and reducing biodiversity; it is also fueling climate change. Worldwide, our industrial agriculture system produces an estimated 14 percent of the world's greenhouse-gas emissions. Including emissions indirectly linked to deforestation, and those associated with fertilizer production, increases that share to 24 percent. And the extensive use of fertilizers and pesticides—99 percent of the world's soy is genetically modified, and is routinely treated with pesticides—is also contaminating ground-water sources, destroying biodiversity and eroding the soil.

We can no longer ignore the external costs of this system. If we are serious about addressing climate change and securing every human being's right to proper nutrition and food security, we must challenge the presumption that an industrial agricultural model, let alone meat, is necessary to feed the world.

In fact, that presumption has little merit. The UN Environment Program estimates that, by 2050, an area between the size of Brazil and India will have to be repurposed into cropland if current food-consumption trends continue. But if the 9.6 billion people expected to inhabit the planet by then were to have a plant-based diet, industrial meat production could be abandoned and all of them could be fed without need for any additional agricultural land.

For many people, the competition for land is a fight for survival. Land access, which is more unevenly distributed than incomes, is a deciding factor in whether someone suffers from malnutrition: 20 percent of households that experience hunger do not own land, and 50 percent of people who experience hunger are small-scale farmers.

The industrial agriculture system's production chains must be replaced with local, decentralized, and sustainable production chains. It is incumbent upon governments to prioritize people's right to food and nutrition above private economic interests. People should not lose their livelihoods and food security for the benefit of agribusiness profits.

The challenge of feeding every human being should not be viewed in opposition to—or as somehow ruling out—questions of social justice and the future of the planet. Poverty, malnutrition and hunger are a result of politics, not scarcity. Project Syndicate

Barbara Unmüßig is president of the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

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