The issue... Industrial livestock is a major cause of climate change

Industrial livestock production is responsible for massive GHG emissions from fossil fuels, fertilizer, manure and large-scale deforestation and land degradation.

It generates numerous other impacts including environmental pollution, occupation of workers, destruction of small family farms, abuse of millions of animals and global health emergencies, such as antibiotic resistance and avian flu.

Technological fixes could reduce no more than 30 percent of current livestock emissions, according to the most optimistic FAO scenario. A system change is imperative.

The problem of factory farms vs. agroecological production

Factory farms

Industrial meat and milk is kept artificially cheap through public subsidies and policies that externalize their real costs and prop up a continuous cycle of surplus production and trade.

Cutting production of industrial meat is therefore essentially tackling the climate crisis, including by changing demand side dynamics that stress improved diets and reducing food waste.

Small-scale farms

The global rise in meat and dairy consumption is projected to grow by 76 and 65 percent respectively by 2050. If not dramatically reduced, this would result in exceeding the entire climate emissions budget set for 2050 in the Paris Agreement.

Per capita meat consumption continues to be highest in North America, Brazil and the EU and is growing rapidly in Asia. If countries with excessive per capita consumption limited consumption to the World Health Organization’s recommended levels, global GHG emissions would decline by 40 percent.

Most countries in the Global South have low levels of per capita meat and dairy consumption, but their urban middle classes are increasingly adhering to Western style diets, including excessive meat and dairy consumption patterns, fast food chains and supermarkets that target these consumers for growth.

Trade Policy

Trade relations may encourage or discourage sustainable agriculture. For example, the US is the world’s largest meat producer and consumer, while Brazil is the world’s largest producer of soy, which is used to produce meat in the US.

Factory farms are more efficient than small-scale farms, but they are also more environmentally and socially harmful. Small-scale farms are more diverse and resilient, and they support local economies and ecosystems.

Consumption must be addressed

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And yet, small-scale farmers, herders and pastoralists are often blamed

Corporate lobby groups, scientists and development agencies often paint small-scale livestock keepers in poor countries as the climate culprits because of their animal “low efficiency” in converting calories to meat or milk in a per capita basis.

Yet, a narrow focus on efficiency and emissions seriously ignores the multitude of benefits of mixed multifunctional and biodiverse small-scale livestock production systems. These include improving soil health, greater climate resilience and other positive environmental and public health benefits.

Small-scale meat and dairy production is already well tailored to local food systems that support the moderate meat and dairy consumption levels that the rest of the world must achieve.

For a full referenced version, visit GRAIN at grainworld.org and IATP Europe at iatp.org.
Two ways to tackle livestock’s contribution to the climate crisis:

Direct meat and dairy production is globally the second largest source of greenhouse gas emissions, after forests. Reducing meat and dairy production is not the only solution, however. Intensification of existing systems will also help reduce emissions.

The solution: Redirect the subsidies

Redistribution of livestock from intensive factory farming to extensive small-scale farming could directly contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The solution: Direct from industrial meat and dairy

Meat and dairy companies have a vested interest in increasing the consumption and production of industrial meat and dairy and have repeatedly blocked government actions that would reduce demand for their products. Banks and other institutional investors must account for the true carbon costs and climate risks of their investments in and direct from companies that harm the climate.

The solution: Stop and rollback so-called free trade and investment deals

Trade and investment agreements, like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) or the Transatlantic Comprehensive Economic Partnership (CETA), are providing investment incentives for companies that prioritize profit over people and planet.

The solution: Reduce meat consumption, eliminate over-consumption

It is crucial to work towards a reduction of industrial meat and dairy, especially red meat, in the portfolios of over-consumers such as North America, Europe, Brazil and China. This can be encouraged by raising and promoting national dietary guidelines and giving them the teeth of enforceability.

The solution: Support small scale production and local markets

There are over 600 million small-scale farmers and smallholders who depend on livestock for their livelihoods and who feed billions of people every day with quality meat, dairy and eggs in a sustainable manner. They urgently need public attention and support!

All policies and programmes should focus on supporting small-scale producers and the local markets that they supply. Livestock producers should be supported to move to agriclimatic production methods, including rotational grazing and land and management measures, that help cut greenhouse gas emissions.

We need to invest in community-led projects and initiatives that seek to proliferate such practices and rebuild decentralized feed systems.

This fact sheet is based on GRAN, “Grazing the ‘bull by the horns: time is out for industrial meat and dairy to save the climate,” January 2021. https://www.gran.org/GRAN21aJPEXpearls-inthe-dark-industrial-meat. For more information, visit GRAN at gran.org and AITP Europe at aitp.org.