



## Food for the Future?

The “Livestock Revolution” and World Hunger

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I live in the rural region of the United States where the techniques of industrial poultry production were first devised. Our landscape is littered with low buildings, each of which contains 20,000 young birds. In these buildings, dead and dying birds lie upon piles of fecal waste, side by side with the live birds destined to be made into chicken sandwiches for McDonalds. The fumes from the accumulated urine are so thick that people wear masks to enter and many of the birds go blind. The birds are fed antibiotics in order to make them grow more quickly. They go to their deaths at six weeks of age, having never seen the sun or breathed fresh air.

The people also suffer. We cannot drink the water from our wells, because it has been poisoned by the waste of the billions of birds per year, along with the fertilizers and pesticides used to grow their feed. The rivers, too, are polluted by run-off and by the wastes which flow from the factories in which the birds are slaughtered and processed into convenience foods for affluent people.

The children in my county grow up in the shadows of the fields filled with acre upon acre of genetically modified maize and soya. Yet sometimes they do not have enough to eat. Their parents are forced to work on the farms or in the poultry factories, where the pay is low and disabling injuries are common. The farmers, too, have difficulties because they have become bound to an industry which controls every aspect of their operations while giving them very little in return. Because they grow commodities for export rather than food for local consumption, they are helpless in the face of national and international changes in the markets for their produce.





Now, the industries which created this miserable state of affairs plan to expand their operations in nations already struggling with hunger and environmental distress. They are aided in these aims by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and -- shamefully -- the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Facing declining markets and increasing regulations in the United States and the European Union, the livestock industries aim to create new demand for meat and other animal-based foods among people who have traditionally eaten more healthy diets rich in plant-based foods. This is dietary racism. In order to meet this artificially created demand, multinational corporations which control the production of meat and other animal-based foods plan to expand their operations in Africa, Asia, and regions of South America. This is the latest phase of agricultural colonialism.

Agricultural colonialism began in the era of European imperialism, when lands previously devoted to the production of food for local and regional consumption were forcibly converted to the production of commodities for export. In the postcolonial era, there have been three phases of agricultural colonialism. The first phase was the so-called “green revolution,” when farmers were encouraged to use artificial pesticides, fertilizers, and “improved” seeds. The second phase, which is ongoing, involves biotechnology and genetically engineered seeds. The third phase, which has just begun, is the so-called “livestock revolution,” which will involve increasing the production of meat and other animal-based foods in low-income nations.

All of these phases of agricultural neocolonialism have had two things in common: (1) they have been promoted as “hunger relief” and (2) the true beneficiaries have been greedy corporations rather than hungry people. In each instance, the focus has been on the production of commodities for export, with both the control and the profits remaining in the hands of the wealthy providers of the inputs needed to produce those commodities.





This new phase of agricultural colonialism may prove to be the most dangerous. Because the production of meat requires more plants, water, and energy per calorie than the cultivation of plants for direct consumption by people, any increase in global meat production will mean a net decrease in the food available for hungry and malnourished people. A few will eat more meat while many others will have less food. Those who increase their meat consumption will not turn out to be so lucky in the long run, because they will have an increased risk of developing the diseases associated with heavy consumption of animal-based foods. Because the inputs needed to produce meat are so expensive, the providers of capital will gain even more power over small farmers and low-income nations.

In addition to further endangering and disempowering the people of impoverished nations, the expansion of industrial animal agriculture in those nations will have environmental consequences which will hurt everyone. Industrial animal agriculture already produces more water pollution than all other human activities combined. Significant increases in animal agriculture will make a bad situation even worse. Because industrial animal agriculture utilizes high levels of water, water resources will be increasingly depleted at the same time as they are increasingly polluted. At the same time, soil degradation associated with intensive grazing will increase desertification. All of this will greatly hasten the emerging worldwide water crisis.

Biodiversity is also threatened by plans to double meat production in the next two decades. It takes, on average, ten pounds of grain, maize, or soya to produce one pound of meat. More and more fields will be converted to the production of genetically engineered livestock feed, leaving less and less land for sustainable cultivation of diverse food crops for people.

This is an issue which demonstrates the truth of the idea that social, economic, and environmental problems are all related. People, animals, and the environment will all be severely damaged so that corporations can earn profits by vending products which are





known to cause disease in those who consume them.

The good news is that there is still time to stop this phase of agricultural colonialism. At the World Food Summit in June of 2002, and at other international venues, we must speak forcefully of the dangers of industrial animal agriculture while at the same time promoting more effective, ethical, and environmentally sustainable solutions to hunger and malnutrition. We must work for more equitable and efficient use of existing food resources and for enhanced international support for self-directed and sustainable cultivation of native and traditional food crops for local and regional consumption in impoverished nations. In affluent nations, we must press people to be more ethical in their consumption choices. In low-income nations, we must support agriculture projects which feed people now while conserving resources so that future generations may also eat. By taking these steps, we can help to feed the world while saving the planet.

Young people have a particularly important role to play in this struggle. Those in affluent nations must take the lead in changing consumption patterns. Those in low-income nations must resist the marketing messages which equate consumption with “development” and join with their elders to struggle against the corporations and politicians who would rob them of their birthright to safe and sufficient food. And, most importantly, youth must use venues like Mandate the Future to join hands across national and ideological boundaries to work together for a world of peace and plenty for all.

The author coordinates the Global Hunger Alliance, an international coalition of environmental, animal, and social justice organizations united in opposition to the expansion of industrial animal agriculture and in favor of more efficient, ethical, and environmentally sustainable solutions to hunger and malnutrition.

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