

Livestock controversies in Europe

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Europe has recently experienced several large animal disease epidemics which, besides huge economic losses, have caused wide scale protests and social unrest. These issues have not only sharpened questions about European animal disease regulations, but also increased public awareness about the negative effects of the industrial animal husbandry systems, and the human-animal relationship on which they are based.

Animals and people have been living together for thousands of years, but the past hundred years have been extraordinary in the amount of change in the relationship. Early European peoples, such as the Celts and Germanics, expressed reverence to nature and worshipped different gods. But western societies today, like many urban societies throughout the world, have undergone vast changes. They increasingly focus upon material prosperity, economic growth and the right of the individual to do what one prefers with the rewards of labour and investment.

Changing relations

Over the past decades a few privileged species, such as dogs, cats and horses, have been increasingly treated as pets and family members, equally entitled to special diets, veterinary (emergency) care, geriatrics, dentistry, physiotherapy and even chemotherapy in case of cancer. Meanwhile, in industrial livestock production units, especially farm species such as pigs, poultry and cattle have been devalued to productive machines, to produce cheap meat, eggs and milk. The intensive animal production system in the Netherlands alone comprises some 14 million pigs and nearly two million cattle, as well as 100

million chickens, confined within an area of about 33,000 square kilometres.

The relations between man and animals are also changing in developing countries, where two-thirds of the world's domestic animals are kept, over 90% owned by rural smallholders. These farmers depend on a wide variety of animals for their food and livelihood, as well as for their cultural identity. In India, for example, cows have been regarded as sacred for centuries. Ecologically as well as culturally the cow has been central to Indian civilization. Cattle products, including urine, dung, milk, curd and *ghee*, or clarified butter, are used in agricultural and health practices, as well as being venerated in various rituals. Similarly, Andean indigenous people consider animals to be their peers, brothers and life companions. They believe that the animals have come from the upper world as a gift from the gods. In return, man must take care of them. *"We raise the animals and the animals raise us, it means caring and nurturing in the same way as a mother treats her daughter."*

The livestock revolution

Meanwhile, the world's livestock sector is growing at an unprecedented rate, due to increased demand for livestock

products, and this growth is now mainly taking place in developing countries. China, for example, is the world's largest producer and consumer of most meat products, producing nearly five times more pork than the US. An increasing amount of chicken meat and pork is exported from Thailand and Brazil to the EU. Patterns of food consumption are

becoming increasingly similar throughout the world, incorporating more meat and dairy products. This trend is associated with increased international trade in foods, the global spread of fast food chains and exposure to fast food habits.

This shift towards intensive animal production in developing countries is also called the livestock revolution. Developing countries appear to be only too willing to adopt the European and North American policies, which favour the largest livestock farmers or enterprises, and progressively incorporate farming into a wider agro-industrial complex. This process has been encouraged by national policies promoting industrial production systems, and by cheap labour, land and feed ingredients. Moreover, and importantly, welfare and environmental regulations are less strict and costly than in Europe. This trend of shifting the much criticised industrialised livestock systems from the rich to the poorer regions in the world, further threatens the livelihood systems of millions of poor rural smallholders, as well as their environments.

Hidden costs

Although successful in meeting human demand for tailored products at economic prices, the hidden costs of the intensive and landless animal production systems can no longer be ignored. Thousands of small farmers have been pushed out of business by the agricultural policies favouring large-scale production units. This process has been accelerated by the introduction of new European regulations requiring farmers to make investments to control the environmental degradation caused by confinement of large number of animals at high stocking rates.

Other hidden costs of the industrialised livestock systems include the negative impact of animal welfare problems and huge feed imports from developing countries, which affects their human food supply. Europe's intensive livestock business requires seven times the area of Europe in other



Photo: ANP

Dutch farmers on their way to the Dutch government in The Hague, to demonstrate against the non vaccination policy for foot and mouth disease

countries to produce animal feed. Moreover, this intensification of live-stock production can lead to a build-up of pesticides and antibiotics in the food chain, which poses a real threat to human and animal health. At the same time, the European Union subsidises its dairy industry to the tune of 16 billion euros a year, including subsidies for exporting cheap dairy products, which have a detrimental impact on small-holder dairy farmers in the developing countries. More than 50% of the dairy products traded on the world market originate from the European Union.

Controversial regulations

Since the 1980s the European Union and its member states have tried to increase the sustainability of the agricultural systems, including industrialised livestock keeping, by issuing an ever increasing number of rules and regulations regarding environment, animal welfare, animal health and food-safety. These rules did not only have positive effects on the mentioned fields, but also increased the production costs and strain on the farmers. In the Netherlands, for example, dung from dairy cattle units can no longer be sprayed on the fields, but has to be injected into the ground in order to reduce the ammonium levels in the air, responsible for the problem of 'acid rain'. At the same time and due to these regulations, farmer groups that want to experiment with more sustainable uses of cattle dung are facing serious difficulties and even court cases.

Another unsustainable regulation of the European Union is the non-vaccination policy of livestock against several highly infectious diseases, such as classical swine fever and foot and mouth disease. Farm animals were vaccinated against these diseases for various decades, and people consumed their products without hesitation. Since 1991, however, European law has prohibited periodical vaccination against foot and mouth disease. The reasons were purely economic: it was calculated that the costs of controlling an occasional outbreak would be less than the costs of the yearly vaccination campaigns, given that revenues would rise from the export of disease-free meat. This calculation turned out to be wrong during the foot and mouth disease outbreak in 2001, which mainly affected Britain and the Netherlands.

Killing healthy animals

When the outbreak started it became clear that according to European regulations the 'stamping out' strategy would have to be followed in order to

stop the disease from spreading, combined with strict controls on transport of animals. This meant killing all animals on farms where a sick animal had been identified, as well as on all surrounding farms within a radius of two kilometres. In a livestock intensive country such as the Netherlands, this included around 2,900 farms where some 271,000 farm animals, nearly all healthy, had to be killed. In total some 90,000 cattle, 136,000 pigs, 35,000 sheep, and 10,000 goats were destroyed in a period of three months in this country. In the United Kingdom over two million animals were killed and burnt for the same reason.

The quality of life of these farm animals, and the attitude of indifference towards their massive destruction, became painfully clear during this period of animal killing. The poor communication between the government officials and the affected farmers' families about this sensitive issue affected complete rural areas, while the general public was shocked by the images of dead cows being thrown into trucks. Not only cattle and farmers suffered, all related industries, the tourist and recreation sectors, research projects and agricultural training institutes had to discontinue their activities. A study of the impact of the foot and mouth crisis amongst Dutch dairy farmers concluded that it had resulted in high levels of stress, marginalisation and depression.

Changing livestock policies

For a few months numerous questions were raised about the non-vaccination policy, the economic reasoning behind it, and the way animals are treated in the livestock industry. This became a general topic for heated debate in the media, shops, and schools. Protest marches were held, and in some areas farmers blocked the roads, which resulted in violent encounters with the police. Actions of solidarity supporting affected farmers were started by numerous citizens groups.

This reaction of the general public has prompted the Dutch government into looking into other livestock policies. This, in combination with consumer preferences, may help move the highly industrialised livestock production systems in a more sustainable direction. This is not easy. The prices of animal products from conventional farming are still much lower than from organic farming, as the hidden costs of environmental degradation, for example, are not included. This situation does not facilitate the marketing of organic animal products, which are now



Photo: Van der Beek

The mass culling of healthy animals during the outbreak of foot and mouth disease has aroused pressure to change controversial livestock policies. Children of villages where all cattle were killed make a colourful cow in school as a way to express their emotions of loss

more expensive.

Some positive effects are also visible, however. Due to pressure from the general public and the high costs of the recent outbreak, the European stamping-out policy in the case of foot and mouth disease is being reconsidered. The area under organic agriculture in the Netherlands increased by 20% between 1999 and 2000, and is now 25,000 ha, some 1.3% of the total agricultural area. The plans are to increase this to 20% by 2020.

Other controversies between the economic benefits and the ecological and social damage of intensive livestock systems still need to be solved. Europe has had to learn in the hard way. Will other regions and cultures in the world simply copy the same system, or will they include these lessons into their development plans?

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