

The Tragic Triangle of Meat Consumerism and Hope for the Future

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To many people, even though they come from different cultural backgrounds, a 'better life' is impossible without meat, eggs, and dairy and other animal products—a vision closely linked to lifestyles in industrialised Western countries.

So, as living standards improve in emerging economies, rising consumption of animal products is one of the factors fueling the expansion of Western-style, large-scale, intensive animal farming (factory farming) and feed crop monoculture farming. Such practices present considerable challenges for climate change, natural resources, environmental health, public health, farmers' livelihoods and animal welfare.

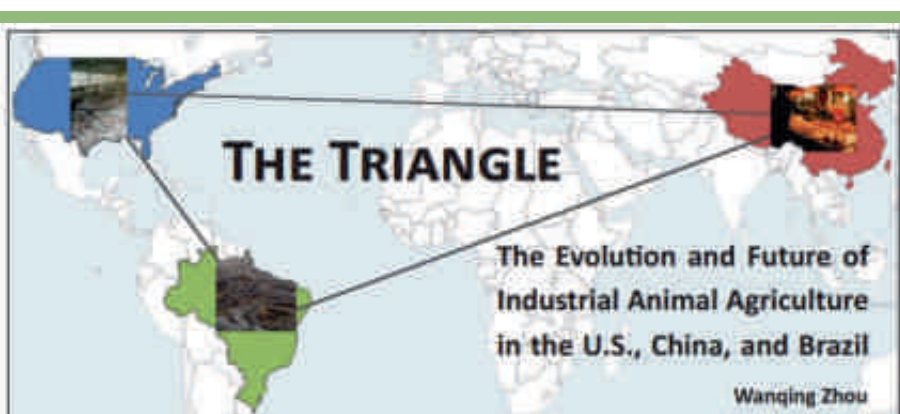
The U.S., China and Brazil are three big and representative players in the global meat and feed sector. They form three points of a triangle: a major exporter of the industrialised meat and dairy production model to the developing world (the U.S.), a rapidly growing economy with a huge appetite for animal products (China), and a country with conflicts between the seeming economic benefits of increasing livestock-related agricultural production and the need to protect some of the most beautiful and ecologically important ecosystems on planet Earth (Brazil).

The impacts of expanding factory farming are not, however, restricted to these countries. For example, Paraguay, in responding to the growing global demand for animal products and therefore animal feed, has recently emerged as a major soybean producer and exporter. Like its neighbour Brazil, Paraguay is now experiencing the negative impacts of industrialised soybean monocropping.

In Paraguay and many other countries in Latin America where

soybean fields are encroaching, indigenous communities are being displaced from the forest, which is burned to make space for soybeans. Young lives have been lost to pesticide fumigation in herbicide-resistant soybean fields (as have the peasant communities' organic crops). Jobs on farms have disappeared as machines have replaced labour. The profits from these soybean plantations has accrued to local elites and multinational companies, further exacerbating social inequality.

At the same time, the over-consumption of meat, eggs and dairy products is fueling an epidemic of the 'diseases of



"The Triangle: The Evolution and Future of Industrial Animal Agriculture in the U.S., China and Brazil" is a discussion paper that explores the 'triangle of factory farming' linking the world's three biggest players in the meat industry (the U.S., China, and Brazil). It analyses the dynamics shaping this triangle.

prosperity', including obesity, Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. This is now happening in both developed and developing countries, and these diseases are having a particularly marked impact on low-income consumers. [1] This is due to policies that subsidise the large-scale production of cheap animal products rather than the production of healthy foods.

The impacts of over-producing and over-consuming meat are more than just physiological however. Many farmers from Central and South America, who lost their livelihoods to industrial agriculture, ended up working in factory farms or meat processing facilities in the U.S., where their rights are not protected. Long hours of repetitive work, which often involves mutilating, killing, or cutting up animals, is rendering these workers prone to psychological problems that have even increased the crime rate in some communities near factory farms and slaughterhouses. [2, 3]

In 'The Triangle: The Evolution and Future of Industrial Animal Agriculture in the U.S., China and Brazil', a discussion paper released by New York-based public policy action tank Brighter Green, the author briefly summarises the history of industrial animal farming in these three countries, and shows that the global expansion of this system is a natural consequence of capitalist growth and globalisation. But the future is more important than the past. So how should we respond now, to shape that future?

From a purely economic perspective, in the face of growing demand the evolution towards capital-intensive industrialised production seems to be inevitable and desirable (in order to meet demand). Equally certain, however, is that from the ecological and sociological perspectives, such evolution is unsustainable, and more importantly, avoidable and adjustable. As rural sociology professors William Heffernan and Mary Hendrickson once wrote, "Sociologists believe the current [economic] system [favouring intensification and consolidation of farm systems] was put in place by humans and can be changed."



Mbya families displaced from the forest due to the expansion of soy farmers. Wanqing Zhou



Forest cleared for soybean plantation in Paraguay. Wanqing Zhou



Soybean field in east Paraguay. Oliver Munnion



Soybean processing facilities in east Paraguay. Ronnie Hall/CIC

In discussions about climate change and other environmental problems, using meat (especially beef) as a protein source has been compared to using coal as an energy source. Similarly, the concept of 'delegitimising' fossil fuels has been discussed in the context of curbing fossil fuel consumption—and delegitimising the overconsumption of animal-based foods has the potential to change the current dominant system to a more sustainable one. Groups and individuals are reconsidering the relationship between human beings and animal products, and are standing up and making changes around the globe.

For example, from the health perspective, organisations like the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine are delegitimising the overconsumption of animal products by revealing their contribution to chronic and acute diseases. Many animal rights and animal welfare advocacy groups are also delegitimising the overconsumption of animal products by bringing the sad truth of animals' suffering inside factory farms to the

attention of compassionate consumers. Environmental researchers and activists are delegitimising the overconsumption of animal products by making clear the connection between industrial animal production and deforestation, water pollution, soil erosion and climate chaos.

These forces are joining and quickly growing. For such a 'globalisation from below' to succeed, however, policy support is also needed. This should include suggested consumption levels, reduced subsidies for the meat and feed sectors, stricter environmental regulations with stronger enforcement, and convincing public education. For example, although China is often blamed for its growing meat consumption, the Chinese government has set a target for

per capita meat consumption in its nutrition development plan, which is much lower than the country's current consumption level, and about a quarter of the per capita consumption in the U.S. and Brazil. A policy like this is a step towards a brighter future.

Ultimately, a deeper reflection on the multi-functionality of agriculture is necessary to enable every farmer, consumer and policy maker to make sustainable decisions. When animals are seen as more than just a source of protein, and their many roles in a healthy agricultural and ecological system are fully recognised and appreciated, we will be able to make fundamental progress on disassembling the triangle of meat and feed.



Peasant farmer in Paraguay condemning the herbicide fumigation for destroying his crops and the health of local communities. Wanqing Zhou

[1] Beyond meatless, the health effects of vegan diets: findings from the Adventist cohorts, Lap-Tai Le and Joan Sabaté, 2014, *Nutrients*, 6:2131-2147. <http://www.mdpi.com/2072-6643/6/6/2131>

[2] Slaughterhouses and Increased Crime Rates – An Empirical Analysis of the Spillover From “The Jungle” Into the Surrounding Community, Fitzgerald, A.J., L. Kalof, and T., Dietz. 2009, *Organization & Environment*, 22(2):158-184. <http://oae.sagepub.com/content/22/2/158.abstract>

[3] Human Consequences of Animal Exploitation: Needs for Redefining Social Welfare, Matsuoka, A. and J. Sorenson, 2013, *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 40(4):7-32