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The world's problems on a plate

Meat production is making the rich ill and the poor hungry

In June, agricultural ministers from around the world will gather in Rome for the World Food Summit. The meeting will focus on how to create a sustainable approach to development and get food in the mouths of the nearly 1 billion who are currently undernourished. More interesting than the agenda, however, will be the menu. At both the official dinners and at NGO gatherings, expect to see the consumption of large quantities of meat. And herein lies the contradiction.

Hundreds of millions of people are going hungry all over the world because much of the arable land is being used to grow feed grain for animals rather than for people. Cattle are among the most inefficient converters of feed. In the US, 157 million metric tons of cereal, legumes and vegetable protein suitable for human use is fed to livestock to produce 28 million metric tons of animal protein for annual human consumption.

The worldwide demand for feed grain continues to grow, as multinational corporations seek to capitalise on the meat demands of affluent countries. Two-thirds of the increases in grain production in the US and Europe between 1950 and 1985, the boom years in agriculture, went to provide feed grain.

In developing countries, the question of land reform has periodically rallied peasant populations and spawned populist political uprisings.

But the question of how the land is used has been of less interest. Yet the decision to use the land to create an artificial food chain has resulted in misery for hundreds of millions around the world. An acre of cereal produces five times more protein than an acre devoted to meat production; legumes (beans, peas, lentils) can produce 10 times more protein and leafy vegetables 15 times more.

The global corporations that produce the seeds, the farm chemicals and the cattle and that control the slaughterhouse and the marketing and distribution channels for beef are eager to tout the advantage of grain-fed livestock. Advertising and sales campaigns geared to developing nations are quick to equate grain-fed beef with a country's prestige. Climbing the "protein ladder" becomes the mark of success.

Enlarging and diversifying their meat supply appears to be a first step for every developing country. They start by putting in modern broiler and egg production facilities — the fastest and cheapest way to produce nonplant protein. Then, as rapidly as their economies permit, they climb "the protein ladder" to pork, milk, and dairy products, to grass-fed beef and finally, if they can, to grain-fed beef.

Encouraging other nations to do this advances the interests of American farmers and agribusiness companies. Two-thirds of all the grain

exported from the US to other countries goes to feed livestock rather than to feed hungry people.

Many developing nations climbed the protein ladder at the height of the agricultural boom, when "green revolution" technology was producing grain surpluses. In 1971 the Food and Agricultural Organisation suggested switching to coarse grains that could be more easily consumed by livestock. The US government provided further encouragement in its foreign aid programme, tying food aid to development of feed grain markets. Companies like Ralston Purina and Cargill were given low-interest government loans to establish grain-fed poultry operations in developing countries. Many nations followed the advice of the FAO and have attempted to remain high on the protein ladder long after the surpluses of the green revolution have disappeared.

The shift from food to feed continues apace in many nations, with no sign of reversal. The human consequences of the transition were dramatically illustrated in 1984 in Ethiopia when thou-

sands of people were dying each day from famine. At the very same time Ethiopia was using some of its agricultural land to produce linseed cake, cottonseed cake and rapeseed meal for export to the UK and other European nations as feed for livestock. Millions of acres of third world land are now being used exclusively to produce feed for European livestock.

Tragically, some 80% of the world's hungry children live in countries with actual food surpluses, much of which is in the form of feed fed to animals which will be consumed by only the well-to-do consumers. In the developing world, the share of grain fed to livestock has tripled since 1950 and now exceeds 21% of the total grain produced.

The irony of the present system is that millions of wealthy consumers in the first world are dying from diseases of affluence (heart attacks, strokes, diabetes, cancer) brought on by gorging on fatty grain-fed meats, while the poor in the third world are dying of diseases of poverty brought on by the denial of access to land to grow food grain for their families. We are long overdue for a global discussion on how best to promote a diversified, high-protein, vegetarian diet for the human race.

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