

So Much for So Few: The Paradox of Intensive Animal Farming

Interview with Philip Lymbery

Billions of animals confined in cages and warehouses, vast amounts of resources consumed, and an ever-growing environmental impact: intensive animal farming has become a central issue in debates over sustainability and food justice. A system that, rather than feeding the planet, is depleting it.

Philip Lymbery



by **Lucrezia Lenardon**

If we were to place all the mammals on Earth on a scale, we would find that the weight of farmed animals far exceeds that of all wild species combined. Today, the total biomass of cattle, pigs, chickens, and other livestock reaches around 630 million tonnes: thirty times that of all terrestrial wild mammals and fifteen times that of marine mammals.

Unlike in the past, these animals are no longer raised in open fields or pastures. Instead, industrial-scale intensive farms, increasingly common across the globe, have been designed to meet a growing worldwide demand for meat and animal products. It is in this context that mega-farms have emerged, such as the one in China's Hubei province, where a 26-storey building has been constructed to house and slaughter up to 1.2 million pigs each year.

We discussed intensive farming, cheap meat, the climate crisis, biodiversity loss, and animal welfare with Philip Lymbery, Global CEO of Compassion in World Farming International. Lymbery is also President of the Eurogroup for Animals, a member of the UN Food Systems Advisory Board, and former UN Food Systems Champion. He has authored several acclaimed books, including *Farmageddon* (2014), *Dead Zone* (2017), and the recent *Sixty Harvests Left* (Bloomsbury, 2022).

In this interview, he takes us through the critical flaws in the global food system and the urgent steps needed to build a more sustainable future.

@Diana Bagnoli / Contrasto



Lucrezia Lenardon, with a background in international relations and environmental economics, is an editor and translator for *Renewable Matter*. She is European Climate Pact Ambassador.



Compassion in World Farming International



Sixty Harvests Left, P. Lymbery (Bloomsbury, 2022)

In your writings, you've often spoken about the dangers of industrial animal farming.

What do you see as the key weaknesses in the current global food production system?

Our global food production system has become increasingly dominated by industrial animal agriculture, which, rather than making food, actually wastes it. It's heavily reliant on keeping animals caged, crammed, and confined in factory farms and feeding them grain, like corn, wheat, soya, that is grown elsewhere. A big weakness is that producing a given quantity of animal protein requires a far larger volume of plant-based protein. Much of that nutritional value, calories and protein alike, is lost in the conversion into industrially produced meat, milk, and eggs. As a result, every year we waste enough food to feed 4 billion people. Intensive farming is not only inefficient and a contributor to global hunger, but it is also the leading cause of animal cruelty worldwide. Moreover, it is a primary driver of ecosystem decline and biodiversity loss, as well as a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions.

Mega-animal farms are expanding rapidly. What are the potential consequences of this trend?

What we're seeing is US-style megafarms, meaning industrial animal agriculture on a major scale. This approach, which originated in the United States, has already caused serious problems, including pollution, the spread of disease, and environmental degradation, as well as enormous suffering for the animals involved. Now, this failing model is spreading to Europe and countries such as China, putting the future of all of us at risk, not only because of its contribution to global warming and ecosystem collapse, but also because it is a powerful vehicle for disease. The concentration of large numbers of animals in confined spaces significantly increases health risks. It is no coincidence that almost three-quarters of the antibiotics used worldwide are administered to farmed animals, mainly to prevent the diseases that arise under these unhealthy conditions.



As a UN Food Systems Advisory Board and EU Strategic Dialogue representative on the future of agriculture for animal welfare, what political or structural changes do you believe are most needed in future food policies?

Last July, I was in Ethiopia for the United Nations Food Systems Summit, where I participated as a member of the advisory committee. What we're advocating is that we need a wholesale change in our food systems, one that is aligned with three key principles. The first is that food systems should be oriented towards feeding people, rather

than producing food inefficiently and generating waste. The second concerns consumption: it must remain within planetary boundaries, which requires a necessary reduction in meat and dairy intake. Last but not least, food policies must adopt the "One Health" approach, recognising the interconnection between human health, animal welfare and a healthy, thriving environment. This calls for a move away from industrial agriculture, in favour of nature-friendly farming, such as agroecology, organic farming, and regenerative agriculture. Systems in which, for



@Diana Bagnoli / Contrasto

example, animals are once again an integral part of the soil's balance, included in mixed crop rotations. These methods produce nutritious food in restored environments, encourage the return of wildlife, and restore soil fertility. Because let's be clear: industrial agriculture is destroying the soil. If we continue on this path, within sixty harvests – that is, sixty years – the soil will no longer be fertile. And without soil, there will be no food: game over. It is not just the right thing to do, but an imperative if we want to guarantee a future for our children.

What can be done in Europe to protect animal welfare?

If we want to protect animal welfare, human health, and the environment in Europe, the first thing to do is to ban cages. It's time to end an era where animals are confined so tightly they can't move freely for weeks or months. As long as we tolerate these models, we're rooting our food system in something fundamentally wrong, destructive and unhealthy. There is a strong movement in Europe to end the era of cages, led by Compassion in World Farming and supported by over a million people who have signed a European citizens' initiative calling on the European Commission to take action. However, despite the Commission's commitment to present a proposal for a cage ban, four years have passed, and we are still waiting. Time is running out, and urgent action is needed to secure a healthier, just, and sustainable food system across the continent.

Given the increasing urgency of the climate crisis, how can we accelerate the decarbonisation of intensive livestock systems?

Animal agriculture, in its various forms, produces more greenhouse gases than all of the world's planes, trains and cars put together. Although some mitigation measures can be adopted under the current system, these are by no means sufficient to bring about the radical change we need. To combat climate change, we need to move away from industrial animal agriculture. We need to move towards nature-friendly, soil-enhancing ways of producing food, where animals live in more welfare-friendly conditions as part of the countryside. What would all this imply? It would allow us to store carbon in the soil, one of the largest natural reservoirs of this element, holding almost twice as much as the atmosphere. But when the soil is degraded, that carbon is released, further exacerbating the climate crisis. At this rate, we risk destroying our land within a few decades. What we must do is reverse course, regenerating soils through nature-friendly farming that allows animals to live better, enables the land to sequester carbon, and helps us produce food that is both more nutritious and more flavourful.

If we give animals more space, people would have to reduce their meat and dairy consumption, right?

Yes. But we need to reduce our meat and dairy consumption anyway. Right now, we're eating twice as much meat and dairy globally as the planet can sustain.

Can you give an example of nature-friendly farming? Have you visited any farms that follow this approach?

I've visited these kinds of farms all over the world. The best examples are those where a variety of crops and animals move across the land in rotation. One year, a field might grow corn, the next year wheat, and the year after that, it might host cows. Then come the sheep, followed by pigs and chickens. It's a beautiful symphony of life moving across the farm, naturally restoring the soil, capturing carbon, and producing the best, most nutritious, and tastiest food. The approach means cultivating a variety of crops and raising different types of animals in a way that enhances the land and creates synergy between the various activities.

Are there economic incentives to support this shift in Europe?

It's absolutely vital that farmers are financially supported in this transition. The Common

Agricultural Policy, which makes up a third of the total EU budget, should be repurposed to support this transition to animal welfare and nature-friendly farming.

You've written extensively about the true cost of cheap meat. Can the global food system change without addressing our relationship with meat?

It's an essential element of the debate. We need a food system that fits within planetary boundaries. And let's be clear: even if we keep factory farming, we'll still need to reduce meat and dairy consumption. Carrying on with this industrial model means compromising our children's future. Is that really the legacy we want? A world that's too hot, where the ecosystems we depend on collapse, where there's no soil left to grow food? Or do we choose something better? We can choose nature-friendly food that's tastier, more nutritious, and better for animal welfare. We can choose healthier diets, with less meat and dairy, more plants and alternative proteins. By doing so, we can truly have it all: high-quality meat and dairy products that are produced sustainably, animals that live better lives, a healthier environment and a livable future for the next generation.

How can we change eating habits, especially considering that global consumption of meat and other animal products is on the rise?

We need to understand that consumption habits exist for a reason. They reflect the food environment we're living in, where meat is relatively cheap and is widely available. It is this context that needs to change. We must encourage a new approach to food and provide viable alternatives: plant-based products, as well as innovations such as cultured meat. This meat is obtained from cells taken from a living animal through a painless biopsy and then grown in a bioreactor. The result is real meat but without the negative impacts: lower greenhouse gas emissions, a fraction of current land use, and no cages or suffering. What's not to appreciate? I know the Italian government has taken a stance against cultured meat, but I think they are being short-sighted.

What gives you hope when you look to the future of food?

I find hope in seeing more and more people, in Europe and around the world, recognising that the time for change has come: that animals deserve respect, and that we must safeguard the future of our countryside and the generations to come. There is a genuine grassroots movement calling for profound transformation, and that encourages me. What is now needed is for politicians to open their eyes, acknowledge this citizens' movement, and implement the policies required for a better future. ●

@Diana Bagnoli / Contrasto

