Meat & markets: pushing industrial meat everywhere

Meat consumption is soaring in many places of the world. If current trends continue global meat consumption will grow a further 76 per cent by 2050 according to the latest studies. Doctors and scientists have been warning us that eating too much meat is bad for out health and is linked to several types of cancer, heart diseases and other problems. This is also bad news for the environment with commercial cattle raising responsible for a large share of deforestation across the world. And it's hurting the climate as well. The FAO calculated that, today, meat production alone – especially that of the industrial type - generates more greenhouse gas emissions than all the world's transport combined. If, on the other hand, heavy eaters of industrial meat kept their level of consumption to the World Health Organization's recommended amounts, the world could reduce 40 per cent of all current greenhouse gas emissions.

So why is meat consumption increasing so much beyond sustainable and healthy levels? The most common narrative explains to us that this is because the growing middle class in many newly industrialising countries can now afford to eat more meat and thus jump on the opportunity. Indeed, the projected growth of meat consumption is especially stark in countries like China, Brazil, India and other countries in their regions. But that is only part of the story.

On the production side, not all meat is being produced the same way. Industrial meat produced on corporate farms is the most rapidly growing segment of meat and dairy production accounting for 80 per cent of the global growth in recent years. This is especially the case for pigs and poultry production which has been falling under corporate control at tremendous speed. Industrial meat production has become a driving force behind the increased consumption as it is based on the highly concentrated production of cheap meat surpluses which are traded as global commodities and forced onto markets everywhere.

Propping up the corporate meat market

So why can industrial meat be produced so cheaply and expand so fast across the globe? Confinement at high stocking density is one part of a systematic effort to produce the highest output at the lowest cost. Yet, at least three key structural factors are at play here: the corporations are fighting off any regulation of their sector, industrial meat is highly subsidised, and trade deals are signed to get it to expand massively into markets across the globe.

When Germany drafted guidelines to reduce meat consumption, demonstrating that a 50 per cent cut by 2030 would be "crucial to climate protection," the industry lobbied. Hard. By the November 2016 launch date, the country's climate change plan had been gutted, and stripped of any reference at all to greenhouse gases in the agriculture sector. Similar stories can be told of the meat lobby in the United States (US), Brazil and other countries where industrial meat is strong.

Despite their opposition to certain kinds of regulation, the industry is very happy to suck at the teat of government subsidy. In 2013, OECD countries dished out US 53 billion dollars to livestock producers, with the European Union (EU) paying US 731 million dollars to its cattle industry alone. The same year, the US Department of Agriculture paid more than US 300 million dollars to just 6 huge meat companies (starting with Tyson Foods) in order to get meat and dairy on school meal trays, compared to just a fraction of that to fruit and vegetable suppliers. Indeed, almost two thirds of all US farm subsidies go to meat and dairy, much of it through subsidised animal feed. Without subsidies, and without the possibility of dismissing the environmental and social costs and impacts caused by the corporations, industrial meat would simply be too expensive to buy.

But the big guns in the industry's arsenal are “free trade” agreements. These corporate trade deals artificially prop up production and consumption by promoting the dumping of cheap meat and dairy into low income countries. They include clauses that eliminate protection for local farmers from foreign competitors, that make it illegal to grant preference to local suppliers or products, and that make government regulations subject to investor-state dispute settlement under which a foreign company can sue governments that adopt social or environmental legislation that they think undermines their profits.

How free trade agreements drive the expansion of industrial meat and dairy

- By forcing tariffs to go down in the last “protected” markets. This is very much a threat in countries where tariffs are still in place to protect local farmers from foreign competitors, or where farmers benefit from subsidies and other price distorting mechanisms. This includes low income countries like India, which is now facing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) trade deal. RCEP will have a big impact on India's meat and dairy sector, forcing it to open it up to imports from Australia and New Zealand: 70 million dairy farmers in India alone face immediate import threats from these commercial livestock powerhouses. But tariffs are also an issue in the high income countries negotiating the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) agreement, which aims to open the EU to more beef imports from the US, as well as those involved in Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), in which US corporate access to meat and dairy consumers in Japan, Canada and Mexico, in particular, was paramount for US negotiators.

- By making local preferences illegal. Granting preference to local suppliers or products becomes flatly illegal under pending deals like TTIP or TPP. "Going local" is at the very heart of common sense strategies to support small farmers and reverse climate change by addressing the ways in which we produce, distribute and access food. Yet this becomes impossible under today's trade deals—and subject to very harsh penalties. Even with some of these negotiations and agreements being in murky waters now due to turbulence from Brexit (the UK leaving the European Union), US right-wing president Trump and other nationalistic tendencies, it is clear that the corporate interests behind these deals will continue to advance.

- By imposing regulatory harmonisation between the trade agreement signatories in order to open markets further, and subjecting those openings to "standstill" and "ratchet" clauses. The standstill clause freezes a country's level of regulation in particular sectors when the country signs it. That means it can only "de"-regulate from that point forward, i.e. it cannot adopt new or additional regulations as it deems necessary. The ratchet clause means that once a country takes steps to liberalise and open its market, it can never go back. So, an action taken by one government in power—e.g. to open up to factory-farmed meat imports—cannot be reversed by a new administration coming to power, thus gutting democratic processes for climate action.

- By making environmental regulations subject to investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS). This means that if a country signs a typical investment agreement with ISDS in it, a foreign company can sue the government if it adopts a public interest policy measure that might impinge on that company's anticipated profits. For example, if a government raises taxes on meat consumption, this measure could be challenged under ISDS by the meat industry. The threat of this outcome alone, in which compensation awards typically run into the hundreds of millions of dollars, has been shown to scare policy makers away from environmental or social policies.

All this prop up production and consumption by promoting the dumping of cheap meat and dairy into low income countries. This is not only killing local livelihoods, it is also killing our health, especially of those who cannot afford to get any other source of meat or it is not even available, and our climate.

We urgently need to reverse the push for global meat and dairy "value chains" as enshrined in big trade agreements between major trading blocks, get rid of the subsidies to industrial meat, and get the industry to take responsibility for the environmental and social damage they create. We need to recognise this and redirect both investment and policy support to local, national and regional markets for sustainably produced livestock by small scale farmers.

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This article is based on (full references and sources for the figures quoted in this article can be found here):

- *Grabbing the bull by the horn: it's time to cut industrial meat and dairy to save the climate* – GRAIN

- *The Global Dangers of Industrial Meat* – GRAIN & Raj Patel, in Civil Eats.