

Violence on the Factory Farm: How Not to Feed the World

By [Colin Todhunter](#)

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Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#),
[Environment](#), [Global Economy](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

The amount of meat humans eat is immense. In 1965, 10 billion livestock animals were slaughtered each year. That number is now over 55 billion. Factory farming is the fastest growing method of animal production worldwide. While industrialised nations dominate this form of farming, developing countries are rapidly expanding and intensifying their production systems.

Violence on the farm

A new virtual reality [film project](#) by Animal Equality shows the public how a factory farm operates. The film focuses on how pigs live out their lives from birth to death - from the perspective of a pig. It is clear that it is not just the pig's final death that is brutal but its whole life

The film shows how a factory farm pig is born in confinement (and into its mother's excrement), its tail is docked and teeth clipped and it is castrated (if male) - all without pain relief. It is separated from its mother, which has been pinned down by a metal bar, and will never see the outdoors.

If the pig is female, ahead of it lies a life of artificial insemination and the taking of its children by humans over and over again, for as long as it remains fertile. Males will be taken to be fattened and will again live in overcrowded cages without stimulation, often leading to mental distress played out by biting other pigs in the cage, and fattened for five months until slaughter.

It is a life worse than that of the worst incarcerated prisoner, yet its only crime is to have been born. And immediately before having its throat cut, the pig can see its own fate as other pigs are hung up in front of it, struggling and bleeding.

Animal Equality is an International animal advocacy organisation that is dedicated to defending all animals through public education, campaigns and investigations. It works to create a more just and compassionate world for animals and is active in many countries. Its film does not go in for sensationalism. What we see appears to be an ordinary factory farm from where the public's food increasingly derives.

Hidden filming inside factory farms shows that, from pigs and cattle to chickens, the stories are similar and the treatment of animals often barbaric. Various organisations have posted short films about the practices and standard abuses of animals within factory farms that take place in many countries (for example, Mercy For Animals has carried out numerous undercover operations in the US and Canada, which can be seen [here](#), and Animal Equality

has conducted [similar investigations](#) across Europe).

Why factory farms - why meat?

It is commonly claimed that we need to massively increase the amount of food we produce to feed a growing world population. Another claim is that chemical-intensive (GM) agriculture and factory farming is the only way to do this. These claims are erroneous.

The world [already produces enough food](#) to feed the anticipated increase in global population, and various official high-level reports state that small-scale/family farms using ecologically friendly methods are better placed to feed a growing population if adequately invested in (see [this](#) and [this](#)). Small farms already [feed most of the world](#) (see [this](#) as well), whereas factory farming belongs to a globalised model of chemical-intensive, mono-cropping and export oriented food and agriculture that [produces and fuels](#) food poverty and insecurity.

Moreover, if as a species we were to cut down on meat consumption or even eradicate it from our diet, we could feed the world more easily.

However, meat eating and factory farming are fuelled by government policies. The heavily subsidised meat industry has encouraged people, especially in the US, to eat more much meat than is necessary. A more healthy, non-meat based diet is being discriminated against due to the meat industry's taxpayer-subsidised cheap meat (see [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#)).

It comes as no surprise then that, [according to the United Nations Population Fund](#):

“Each US citizen consumes an average of 260 pounds of meat per year, the world's highest rate. That is about 1.5 times the industrial world average, three times the East Asian average, and 40 times the average in Bangladesh.”

And all this meat eating has a huge impact.

A [2010 report](#) from the United Nations Environment Programme's International Panel of Sustainable Resource Management declared:

“Impacts from agriculture are expected to increase substantially due to population growth and increasing consumption of animal products... A substantial reduction of impacts would only be possible with a substantial worldwide diet change, away from animal products.”

Livestock needs land, which places pressure on wildlife habitat and forest. Livestock is the world's largest land user. Grazing occupies 26% of the earth's ice-free terrestrial surface, and feed crop production uses about one third of all arable land. Producing 1kg of meat through typical industrial methods requires 20kg of feed for beef, 7.3kg for pork and 4.5kg for chicken (see [this](#)).

The above-mentioned 2010 UN report explained that western-type dietary preferences for meat would be unsustainable in future, given that the world population is forecast to rise to 9.1 billion by 2050. Demand for meat is expected to double by this date, and meat consumption is already steadily rising in countries such as China, which once followed more

sustainable, vegetable-based diets.

David Pimentel, professor of ecology in Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, implies a switch to a diet based on vegetable protein could have massive implications:

"If all the grain currently fed to livestock in the United States were consumed directly by people, the number of people who could be fed would be nearly 800 million."

According to Pimentel, animal protein production requires more than eight times as much fossil-fuel energy than the production of plant protein while yielding animal protein that is only 1.4 times more nutritious for humans than the comparable amount of plant protein.

Far more energy is put into animals per unit of food than for any plant crop because cattle consume so much more grain as they produce as meat. Animal farms use nearly 40 per cent of the world's total grain production. In the US, nearly 70 per cent of grain production is fed to livestock. If humans continue to eat more and more meat, it means we're not just going to destroy more forest and use far more land and water, but we're also going to manufacture more chemical fertilisers and pesticides to grow the feed. We will thus be creating far more pollution and greenhouse gases.

Meat and water

Meat production also places a great strain on fresh water, which is going to become an increasingly scarce resource in the coming years. [John Anthony Allan](#), professor at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, argues that the average meat-eating US citizen consumes five cubic meters of water compared to half of that which vegetarians consume. But not all meat is equally water-intensive.

He adds that beef requires 15,500 litres of water per kilogram compared to chicken, which needs 3,900 litres per kilogram. So, at the very least, consumers could think about reducing their beef consumption since it requires the most unsustainable water footprint.

In her book, [Stolen Harvests](#), Vandana Shiva says that for every pound of red meat, poultry, eggs and milk produced, farm fields lose about five pounds of irreplaceable top soil. She also states that the water necessary for meat breeding comes to about 190 gallons per animal per day, or 10 times what a normal Indian family is supposed to use in one day, if it gets water at all.

The great Ogallala aquifer in the US is the largest body of fresh water on earth. The water in it is left from the melted glaciers of the last Ice Age. It is not replenished from rainfall. Author [John Robbins](#) notes that more than 13 trillion gallons of water are taken from the aquifer every year. More water is withdrawn from the Ogallala aquifer every year for beef production than is used to grow all the fruits and vegetables in the entire US. Robbins states that it's only a matter of time before most of the wells in Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Colorado and New Mexico go dry, and portions of these states become scarcely habitable for human beings.

Of course, much has also been written about the [impact of modern agriculture on the climate](#) as well as the [massive adverse health, social and environmental](#) impacts across

South America, which supplies much of Europe with its (GM) animal feed and in doing so drives ecocide and genocide (see Helena Paul's piece in the link).

One last point should be made about the one billion cattle currently alive and the manure produced. In traditional, sustainable systems of agriculture, manure is part of a holistic cycle: it's fertiliser. But in modern factory farms, this waste is not cycled through the farm because there's just too much of it. Instead, waste is stored in manure 'lagoons', which emit methane and, even worse for the environment and climate, nitrous oxide.

For instance, [in North Carolina](#) hog production has increased faster than anywhere else in the US. The hogs produce over 19 million tons of manure each year and most of it gets stored in lagoons. Many of those lagoons flooded and burst when Hurricane Floyd swept through the region in 1999. Hundreds of acres of land and miles of waterway were flooded with excrement, resulting in massive fish kills and millions of dollars in clean-up costs. The lagoons' contents are also known to leak out and seep into groundwater.

Sustainable agriculture and less meat

Factory farming is now a [global phenomenon](#). For example, just 40 years ago the Philippines' entire population was fed on native eggs and chickens produced by family farmers. Now, most of those farmers are [out of business](#). And because world trade rules encourage nations from imposing tariffs on imported products, they are forced to allow cheap, factory-farmed US meat into the country. These products are then sold at lower prices than domestic meat. There is therefore pressure for local producers to scale up and industrialise to compete.

The route to feeding the world sustainably and equitably depends on a model of agriculture that first and foremost is locally centred, serves local communities and is based on ecologically sound organic practices, including agroecology. In other words, a model of agriculture not dominated by factory farming, manipulated global markets, transnational agribusiness, commodity speculators, petrochemical interests and giant retailers as well as trade agreements and rules which act to undermine localised, smallholder farming (described [here](#)). It also involves cutting back on global meat consumption.

Small farms are [more productive](#), [more resilient](#) and [more beneficial to local economies](#) than factory farms: they tend to ensure local food security, employ more people and money (and food) tends to stay within the locality. Yet, despite this, small farmers are being displaced and larger factory farms are being planned, which will employ fewer and fewer people, thus [sucking the life from local communities](#). They will grab the lion's share of taxpayer subsidies (as is the case, explained [here](#) and [here](#)) and send even more small farms to the wall.

Of course there is a lot more that could be said about the issues at hand, but, in finishing, we should not lose sight of two points that are key to this discussion.

First, neoliberal capitalism is sowing the seeds of humanity's destruction. It is stripping the environment bare through unsustainable levels of consumption and institutionalised economic plunder, the latter of which involves the programmed eradication of indigenous, productive agriculture. In doing so, the world's ability to feed itself is being destroyed.

And the destruction of rural livelihoods and communities is for what? Agriculture and food

poisoned with chemicals and the mass incarceration of animals who suffering is hidden from public view; an urban-centric model of 'development' defined by greed and narcissism on the one hand and austerity and poverty on the other; all to be played out in polluted, congested mega-cities shaped by powerful private corporations which seek to colonise and mould the very essence of existence, from cradle to grave, from field to plate.

Second, there are deep-seated questions to be asked about how we as individuals personally regard our mass slaughter and wholesale exploitation of animals on factory farms. Should we be treating animals more humanely in agriculture, or should we even be producing animal products for eating at all? Even if our consciences can continue to live with this, in the long run it will be not only impractical to expand factory farming and increase meat consumption but, based on the evidence presented here, catastrophic to do so.

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Articles by: [Colin Todhunter](#)

About the author:

Colin Todhunter is an extensively published independent writer and former social policy researcher. Originally from the UK, he has spent many years in India. His website is www.colintodhunter.com
https://twitter.com/colin_todhunter

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