

Hunger, Meat, and the Banality of Evil

Chapter in: *Circle of Compassion: Connecting Issues of Justice*

by Dawn Moncrief (2015)

Introduction – Making the Connection

Global hunger and the use of animals for food are distinct yet interconnected forms of institutionalized injustice at the root of some of the world's most severe and persistent suffering. They are also related in tangible, sometimes counterintuitive, ways in that the vast and increasing worldwide consumption of animal-derived foods adversely impacts broader hunger alleviation and food security efforts.

For years, influential think tanks such as the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) have widely acknowledged the dangers of the world's growing appetite for animal-derived foods. In 1999, they coined the term “Livestock Revolution” in their report “Livestock to 2020: The Next Food Revolution” to describe the causes and consequences of the unprecedented increases in global meat¹ consumption, specifically increases stemming from lower- and middle-income countries.²

Unfortunately, as is too often the case, IFPRI did not include reducing meat consumption as part of their recommendations. Despite their research implicating the “livestock sector” as a major driver of food insecurity and natural resource depletion, they discounted efforts to reverse the trend because meat consumption was deemed to be a “demand-driven” cultural given. They contended, “It is unwise to think that the Livestock Revolution will somehow go away in response to moral suasion by well-meaning development partners. It is a structural phenomenon that is here to stay.”³

I credit the “Livestock to 2020” report—and subsequent reports from other leading authorities that are dire in their predictions about the high costs of animal agriculture, but exclude meat reductionist measures in their recommendations—with inspiring my work to connect-the-dots, thereby reducing both hunger and animal consumption. I am also particularly interested in counterbalancing the disproportionate focus on the *aggregate growth totals* of meat consumption in “developing” countries, to the neglect of the much greater *existing per capita* meat consumption in “developed” countries. This unbalanced focus limits success and does not appropriately challenge the attitudes and behaviors of powerful, high-consuming individuals and countries—most notably, those making the policy recommendations.

While endorsements for reducing global meat consumption are gaining favor in some circles, the push to readily meet the rising demand for animal products is still pervasive. My goal is to increase

¹ The term “meat” is sometimes used here as a shorthand for animal-derived foods: meat, dairy, and eggs.

² Delgado, Christopher et al, “Livestock to 2020: The Next Food Revolution.” International Food Policy Research Institute, Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, and International Livestock Research Institute, 1999. www.ifpri.org/publication/livestock-2020

³ Ibid., p. 65.

awareness about the benefits of minimizing animal consumption so that it becomes a priority on the agendas of social justice advocates, formal and informal policymakers, thought leaders, and conscience-driven individuals with the privilege and ability to be agents of change in their own spheres.

To this end, I founded A Well-Fed World, a Washington, DC-based nonprofit organization with the dual mission to feed people and save animals. In addition to our advocacy efforts, A Well-Fed World partners with and financially strengthens plant-based food and farming programs, especially in low-income countries. We also provide support to farm animal care and rescue groups. These hands-on projects provide immediate assistance to people and animals in need, as a complement to our broader work for long-term, structural change.

This essay builds on that program base and more than 15 years of research to provide a glimpse into some of the ways in which meat exacerbates hunger by redistributing food away from the poorest of the poor. It also exposes the horrific standard “farming” practices used to produce meat, dairy, and eggs. Finally, it connects hunger and meat as systems of oppression that normalize atrocities, thereby desensitizing people and bolstering other forms of systemic violence and injustice.

Immense Suffering - Counting Victims

For sheer scale of global suffering, few things rival the immense, unnecessary, and unconscionable suffering of people hungry from lack of food, or of animals used and abused for food. Yet despite their severity and pervasiveness, efforts to alleviate global hunger lack sufficient urgency and priority, while the tragic plight of animals used for food barely registers on global agendas.

Of the world’s more than seven billion people, more than 840 million are *counted* as suffering from chronic hunger.⁴ While shockingly high, this is actually a conservative estimate based on strict criteria that assumes a “sedentary” lifestyle combined with prolonged caloric deficiency lasting more than a year. The number of people officially counted as hungry can more than double when “normal” and “intense” levels of activity are intermixed with the calculations.⁵ The numbers of undernourished, food-insecure people increases further still when intermittent food shortages and nutritional intake are considered.

Children suffer the most severe consequences of our broken food system, with more than 6,000 dying every day of malnutrition and hunger-related causes.⁶ With more than 250 children dying *every*

⁴ Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, “The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2013: The multiple dimensions of food security.” 2013, p. 8. www.fao.org/docrep/018/i3434e/i3434e.pdf

⁵ Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, “The State of Food Insecurity 2012: Economic growth is necessary but not sufficient to accelerate reduction of hunger and malnutrition.” 2012, p. 55. www.fao.org/docrep/016/i3027e/i3027e.pdf

⁶ Enough Food for Everyone IF, “The Need for UK Action on Global Hunger.” January 23, 2013, p.6. www.enoughfoodif.org/sites/default/files/IF_policy_report.PDF

hour, why is it so rare that global hunger makes the nightly news? In part, it's because such extreme and widespread hunger and death are the norm. In part, it's not on the news because it's not "new."

For animals, the numbers are even more mind-numbing. Between 65-70 billion land animals are raised and killed for food annually.⁷ That's a staggering increase from the year 2000 when the death toll was 50 billion, and these numbers are expected to fully double from 50 billion to 100 billion by 2050.⁸ These figures do not include aquatic animals killed in food production, whose numbers are counted in the trillions.⁹ Also excluded are the millions of wildlife who are exterminated because they are considered predators or pests to agribusiness operations.

For perspective, 65 billion animals a year is more than 178 million (178,000,000) land animals (mostly chickens, turkeys, pigs, and cows) who die in our global food production system every day. That's more than 7.4 million (7,400,000) animals every hour... more than 123,000 every minute... more than 2,000 every second. As some of the world's top per capita meat consumers, Americans are responsible for the death of more than 9 billion farmed animals a year.¹⁰ That's more than 24 million food-related animal deaths every day in the U.S. alone... more than 1 million every hour... more than 16,500 every minute... more than 275 every second.

The Injustice of Hunger - The Suffering of People

With respect to the billions of people and animals suffering as a direct result of our food production system, it is human action, intention, and lack of necessity that solidify these tragedies as injustice. Suffering in itself is not injustice. Similarly, harm is not necessarily violence. Accidents happen. Natural disasters and diseases happen. It is the choice to participate in systems that inflict unnecessary harm that constitutes violence and injustice.

Gandhi brought widespread attention to conceptualizing hunger and poverty as forms of violence. While less obvious than physical acts of violence, hunger is not merely the result of bad fortune and inadequate assistance. Hunger is also the consequence of an unjust, often corrupt, food system that allows profits to trump need, and rewards the powerful for exploiting the vulnerable.

To better understand hunger as violence, consider that the pain imposed by hunger is constant and

⁷ Compassion in World Farming, "Strategic Plan 2013-2017: For Kinder, Fairer Farming Worldwide." 2013, p. 3. www.ciwf.org.uk/includes/documents/cm_docs/2013/c/ciwf_strategic_plan_20132017.pdf

⁸ Steinfeld, Henning et al, "Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options." Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and the Livestock Environment and Development Initiative, November 2006, p. XX. <http://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/010/a0701e/a0701e.pdf>

⁹ Fish Feel, "Overview," accessed 2014. www.fishfeel.org

¹⁰ The Humane Society of the United States, "Farm Animal Statistics Slaughter Total for 2013," accessed 2014. http://www.humanesociety.org/news/resources/research/stats_slaughter_totals.html

unrelenting—physically, mentally, and emotionally. Imagine the incessant, gnawing ache of never having enough food. Imagine the need to ration those small amounts of food that do become available, then having to decide who in your family receives a particular share. Perhaps most heartbreaking—and something few of us could even begin to imagine—is the despair of watching helplessly as our children wither away because we can't feed them enough food or the right kinds of food.

Hunger is also a form of structural violence that tears through societies, destroying lives and debilitating countries. Undernourished adults and children suffer poor health, low energy levels, and a reduced ability to concentrate. This makes it all the more difficult to work the arduous hours that are often required for mere survival. For children fortunate enough to attend school, their learning is severely impaired. As food and social justice author Frances Moore Lappé explains, hunger does not even need to be chronic to have devastating generational consequences. She notes, “even short-term nutritional deficits, particularly if occurring in the first 1,000 days of life, can negatively affect health, learning, and income over one’s lifetime, and even affect one’s offspring.”¹¹

The Injustice of Meat - The Suffering of Animals

In 1963, social and political philosopher Hannah Arendt famously theorized “the banality of evil.”¹² She surmised that the greatest atrocities in history are perpetrated not by monsters, but by ordinary citizens who passively accept the status quo, even when the attitudes, practices, and policies are unspeakably heinous. These atrocities persist when everyday people participate in them because “that’s just the way things are done.”

For contemporary examples of what Arendt termed “normalized atrocities” and “routinized violence,” it would be difficult to find a category of suffering either more extreme or more commonplace than that endured by animals used in the production of meat, dairy, and eggs. As feminist and animal advocate Carol Adams explains, “Whereas women may feel like pieces of meat, and be treated like pieces of meat (emotionally butchered and physically battered) animals actually are made into pieces of meat.”¹³

The cruelty becomes even more stark when juxtaposed against the peaceful nature of farmed animals. Nineteenth century essayist Thomas DeQuincey eloquently observed that, “cows are amongst the gentlest of breathing creatures; none show more passionate tenderness to their young when deprived of them.” Yet, cows and other farmed animals endure a nonstop cycle of forced pregnancy and birth, followed by the harsh, unnatural loss of their offspring. Indeed, the exploitation of motherhood is fundamental to animal agriculture.

¹¹ Lappé, Frances Moore et al, “How We Count Hunger Matters.” *Ethics & International Affairs*. Cambridge University Press, July 9, 2013, p. 3. www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/2013/how-we-count-hunger-matters

¹² Arendt, Hannah, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. The Viking Press, 1963.

¹³ Adams, Carol, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. Continuum Press, 1990, p. 46.

A dairy cow, like any mother, doesn't just spontaneously produce milk. She produces milk for her newborn calf. So to continuously produce milk for human consumption, she must be repeatedly impregnated, usually once a year for about five years. Like humans, a cow's gestation period is nine months. After a long pregnancy and a painful birth, her calf is permanently taken from her, usually within 24 hours. If the calf is female, she is doomed to the same fate as her mother. Or if not needed on the dairy, she is slaughtered for veal or cheap beef like the male calves.¹⁴ This is the suffering in a glass of milk.

A breeding pig is likely to spend most of her life in metal crates so small that she literally cannot turn around. While gestation crates (at only two feet wide and seven feet long) are now illegal in four states, they are still the most common "housing" method. A pig's gestation period is just under four months. After giving birth, she is locked immobile in a farrowing crate for three to four weeks. Her piglets are deprived of maternal comfort as they nurse through metal bars. After three or four years of this miserable cycle, she is slaughtered.¹⁵ This is the suffering in a slice of bacon.

An egg-laying battery hen spends her 18–24 months of life crammed into a small wire cage with four to ten other hens. This leaves each bird with less than a sheet of paper's worth of space. None of them can even spread their wings. Thousands of wire cages are stacked on top of each other in huge sheds without adequate ventilation or sunlight. To reduce the severe harm caused by stress-induced pecking at each other, the tips of their sensitive beaks are seared or sliced off without pain relief.¹⁶ This is the suffering in an egg.

Further harm from egg production extends to the male chicks. As valueless "by-products" who won't produce eggs or grow as large as chickens bred for meat, they are typically disposed of as newborns. Each year, more than 250 million male chicks are killed in the United States alone. That's more than 600,000 every day, more than 25,000 every hour. These baby birds are literally thrown away in dumpsters to suffocate on top of each other, poisoned with gas, electrified on "kill plates," or ground alive in industrial macerators.¹⁷ Imagine the horror and public outcry if these were puppies or kittens.

¹⁴ The Humane Society of the United States, "The Welfare of Cows in the Dairy Industry," accessed 2014. <http://www.humanesociety.org/assets/pdfs/farm/hsus-the-welfare-of-cows-in-the-dairy-industry.pdf>

¹⁵ The Humane Society of the United States, "The Welfare of Breeding Sows," accessed 2014. http://www.humanesociety.org/assets/pdfs/farm/welfare_breeding_sows.pdf

¹⁶ The Humane Society of the United States, "The Welfare of Animals in the Egg Industry," accessed 2014. http://www.humanesociety.org/assets/pdfs/farm/welfare_egg.pdf

¹⁷ Ibid.

Regardless of farm size or ownership type, intensive production methods are nearly universal in the United States and many of these cruel practices are standard operating procedures.¹⁸ Agribusinesses have usurped and greenwashed terms like “humane,” “free-range,” and “family farm,” but humane labels are riddled with loopholes that still allow many of the worst factory farming cruelties.¹⁹ Such everyday practices include castration, dehorning, debeaking, tail-docking, and branding—all without pain relief. Severe confinement and crowding are also routine. Ultimately, regardless of which type of food product or which production process, the animals face a gruesome slaughterhouse end—generally hung upside down by their feet to have their throats slit.²⁰ This is the suffering in using animals for food.

Tangible Connections – The Inefficiency of Meat

Overwhelmingly, it is not the case that we must choose between feeding people or saving animals. On the contrary, animal consumption is generally a matter of preference based on factors such as habit, acquired taste, convenience, and custom. It is important to distinguish eating meat for survival from eating meat for preference. This is especially relevant as the former is often used to justify the latter, even when healthful plant-based options are abundant.

There are many tangible ways in which the production and consumption of animal-based foods negatively impact global hunger and food security. For our purposes here, we’ll focus on meat consumption for preference, especially among wealthy and high-consuming populations. We’ll also focus on one of the most obvious ways in which meat consumption contributes to global hunger—the inefficiency of using animals as food.²¹

Simply put, animals eat much more food than they produce. Most of the caloric energy they consume is used to fuel their metabolism and to form bones, cartilage, feathers, fluids, and other non-edible parts.²² As such, animals raised for food take more from the global food supply than they provide. Even meat proponents acknowledge many of the inefficiencies inherent in cycling plant-based feed crops through animals to produce animal-based foods.²³

¹⁸ Farm Forward, “Factory Farming,” accessed 2014. www.farmforward.com/farming-forward/factory-farming

¹⁹ Humane Facts, “Labels and Loopholes.” accessed 2014. www.humanefacts.org/labels-loopholes

²⁰ Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, “Management of Waste from Animal Product Processing,” accessed 2014. <http://www.fao.org/wairdocs/lead/x6114e/x6114e04.htm>

²¹ The focus here is on grain-fed animals as they represent the overwhelming majority of animal agriculture, especially in high-income countries. Grass-fed animals pose other threats related land use, deforestation, and greenhouse gases, which are beyond the scope of this essay.

²² Humane Society International, “The Impact of Industrialized Animal Agriculture on World Hunger.” 2009, p. 3. http://www.hsi.org/assets/pdfs/hsi-fa-white-papers/the_impact_of_industrial_farm.pdf

²³ Rueter, Ryan, “Supplement Conversion Ratio.” *Beef Magazine*, November 3, 2009. www.beefmagazine.com/nutrition/1104-supplement-conversion-ratio

Compared to consuming plant-based foods directly, eating crop-fed animals yields only a small fraction of the total available calories *and* protein.²⁴ Raising animals for food is thus not only resource-intensive—requiring massive amounts of land, water, and energy—it is also specifically crop-intensive, requiring far more crops than would be needed to feed people directly.

A recent scientific report, “Redefining Agricultural Yields: From Tonnes to People Nourished Per Hectare,” found that existing croplands could feed up to four billion more people globally. The analysis specified that by reallocating crops used for animal feed and biofuels toward direct human consumption, the availability of global food calories could be increased by as much as 70%.²⁵ With this, we see not only the magnitude of food that could be conserved, but also a path with which we could feed far more people, while harming far fewer animals. Coincidentally, 70% more food is also the amount researchers predict will be needed to feed our expected population of more than nine billion people in 2050.²⁶

Obviously, hunger is a deep-seated and extraordinarily complex problem. The point is not that eliminating animal-based food production and consumption will *solve* world hunger. The point is that any viable strategy to provide meaningful, long-lasting hunger solutions and improve global food security must include reducing animal-based food consumption as an essential part of the equation.

Supply and Demand – Outbidding the Poor

Beyond its negative impact on crop use, resource use, and other environmental concerns, let’s consider how meat consumption affects supply and demand, and how supply and demand affects food prices and food availability.²⁷ Because farmed animals consume massive amounts of crops, the global demand for food crops is high. High/increasing demand relative to supply increases food prices, thus decreasing purchasing power. A counterargument can be made for technology increasing food yields, but resource limitations, population growth, climate change, and biofuel competition are grave threats likely to tighten future food supply beyond the scope of tech-driven yield increases. As such, high demand for animal feed crops puts upward pressure on global food prices, as those who can pay more for food, feed, and fuel crops outbid those who cannot even afford their basic food requirements.²⁸

²⁴ Pimentel, David, “Livestock Production: Energy Inputs and the Environment.” *Food, Energy, and Society: Third Edition*. Taylor and Francis Group, 2008, p. 68.

²⁵ Cassidy, Emily et al, “Redefining Agricultural Yields: From Tonnes to People Nourished Per Hectare.” *Environmental Research Letters*, V. 8(3), IOPScience, September 2013, p. 1. <http://iopscience.iop.org/1748-9326/8/3/034015>

²⁶ Searchinger, Tim et al, “Creating a Sustainable Food Future: A menu of solutions to sustainably feed more than 9 billion people by 2050.” World Resources Institute, United Nations, and World Bank, December 2013, p. V. www.wri.org/sites/default/files/WRI13_Report_4c_WRR_online.pdf

²⁷ This basic explanation of supply and demand principle holds constant a wide range of context-dependent factors that affect the overall price to greater or lesser degrees. Also note, food cost is more relevant to increasing urban populations than rural communities.

²⁸ Westhoff, Patrick, *The Economics of Food: How Feeding and Fueling the Planet Affects Food Prices*. Pearson Education, FT Press, 2010, p. 97.

We saw this play out during the 2007-2008 food crisis in which the increased use of biofuels is considered a leading contributor.²⁹ Growth in the biofuel sector increased global demand for food crops, which elevated food prices. The wealthy paid high prices to purchase tremendous amounts of extra crops for animal feed and biofuel. In doing so, we outbid the poor for even their basic food needs. In a system where having enough food is deeply dependent on income, higher prices drove access to food out of the reach of the poor, resulting in skyrocketing malnutrition, hunger, starvation, and death.

While there are perilous trade-offs related to *fuel vs. food*, a more serious concern for a variety of reasons is *feed vs. food*. With 75% of all agricultural land used for animal production—and more than a third of global calories and half of global protein inefficiently used as animal feed³⁰—the impact of increasing or decreasing global meat consumption is monumental even outside of price fluctuations.

Meat as Overconsumption, Redistribution, and Waste

To the extent that meat requires more calories and resources to produce than plant-based foods of equal or superior nutritional value, meat can be considered a form of overconsumption. Similarly, to the extent that vast amounts of food are diverted away from feeding people directly, meat can be considered a form of redistribution.

To provide some perspective of the scale at which meat is a form of overconsumption, commonly cited Feed Conversion Ratios (FCRs)³¹ for beef cows range between 6:1³² and 16:1.³³ These FCRs indicate that cows consume 6–16 pounds of feed crops for every pound of weight gained or pound of ready-to-eat meat produced. There are many factors to consider in determining specific conversion ratios.³⁴ Smaller ratios often refer to the live weight gain of the animals. Larger ratios more accurately represent inefficiencies based on edible meat after slaughter and processing.³⁵

²⁹ ActionAid, “Fueling the Food Crisis: The Cost to Developing Countries of US Corn Ethanol Expansion.” Tufts University, October 2012, p. 6. www.ase.tufts.edu/gdae/Pubs/rp/ActionAid_Fueling_Food_Crisis.pdf

³⁰ Cassidy, Emily et al, “Redefining Agricultural Yields: From Tonnes to People Nourished Per Hectare.” *Environmental Research Letters*, V. 8(3). IOPScience, September 2013, p. 2-3. <http://iopscience.iop.org/1748-9326/8/3/034015>

³¹ The range of 6-16:1 represents commonly cited beef FCRs. Some meat industries report smaller ratios. Others, like researcher Vaclav Smil, report higher ratios. See also, “Creating a Sustainable Food Future,” p. 4 for extremely high inefficiency ratios based on new calculation methods. www.wri.org/sites/default/files/WR113_Report_4c_WRR_online.pdf

³² Rueter, Ryan, “Supplement Conversion Ratio.” *Beef Magazine*, November 3, 2009. www.beefmagazine.com/nutrition/1104-supplement-conversion-ratio

³³ Yacoubou, Jeanne, “Factors Involved in Calculating Grain:Meat Conversion Ratios.” *Vegetarian Resource Group*, accessed 2014. www.vrg.org/environment/grain_meat_conversion_ratios.php

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

Yet, even the high-end of these commonly cited FCRs are conservative based on newer, more comprehensive calculation methods that have been recently published. According to the World Resources Institute (in conjunction with the United Nations and World Bank), “even poultry, the most efficient source of meat, convert only around 11 percent of gross feed energy into human food.”³⁶ And it’s not a matter of “trading-up” carbohydrate-based grain for protein-based meat. In terms of protein, eating animals is also a highly inefficient net loss.³⁷ This is why even a small amount of meat can be an overconsumption that draws unevenly or unfairly from the global food supply.

To illustrate the concept of meat as a form of overconsumption, let’s say that the production of a 100-calorie hamburger patty requires 1,000 calories of crops used for animal feed (assuming a conservative 10:1 ratio). As such, the 100-calorie hamburger patty can be seen as an overconsumption of 900 calories. Over the course of a day, 2,000 calories consumed from an animal-inclusive diet could easily carry a global cost in excess of 5,000 calories. Multiply this by two or three billion of the world’s heaviest meat consumers, and the result is a massive redistribution of calories within the global food system.

So, while there may be technically enough calories produced to feed the world’s current population—about 2,800 daily calories per person,³⁸ with caloric need for normal activity ranging between 1,800 and 2,800³⁹—the high demand for animal-derived foods distributes crops in ways that exacerbate regional disparities. Regional food disparities are sometimes missed from a global perspective, but despite significant macroeconomic improvements between 1990 to 2012, the 45 “least-developed countries” have almost 60 million more undernourished people suffering from extreme caloric deficiencies in both quantity and quality.⁴⁰

Such food disparities, and hunger more generally, are likely to worsen as our population expands, diets become more animal-centric, natural resources dwindle, and climate disruptions intensify. If, however, those of us in wealthy, high-consuming countries, and the high-consuming sectors of low- and middle-income countries, reduce (or better yet eliminate) our meat consumption, we could greatly reduce our enormous “foodprint” to help reverse these trends.

³⁶ Searchinger, Tim et al, “Creating a Sustainable Food Future: A menu of solutions to sustainably feed more than 9 billion people by 2050.” World Resources Institute, United Nations, and World Bank, December 2013, p. 4. www.wri.org/sites/default/files/WRI13_Report_4c_WRR_online.pdf

³⁷ Cassidy, Emily et al, “Redefining Agricultural Yields: From Tonnes to People Nourished Per Hectare.” *Environmental Research Letters*, V. 8(3). IOPScience, September 2013, p. 2-3. <http://iopscience.iop.org/1748-9326/8/3/034015>

³⁸ Lappé, Frances Moore et al, “How We Count Hunger Matters.” *Ethics & International Affairs*, Cambridge University Press, July 9, 2013, p. 5. www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/2013/how-we-count-hunger-matters, interpreting FAOSTAT, “Food Balance Sheets” (Entry: World+2009), www.faostat.fao.org/site/354/default.aspx

³⁹ WebMD, “Calories Chart,” accessed 2014. www.webmd.com/diet/calories-chart

⁴⁰ Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, “The State of Food Insecurity 2012: Economic growth is necessary but not sufficient to accelerate reduction of hunger and malnutrition.” 2012, p. 46. www.fao.org/docrep/016/i3027e/i3027e.pdf

Finally, let's consider the recent push to reduce consumer food waste in high-income countries as a means of increasing food availability for the world's poor.⁴¹ To the extent that reducing food waste in high-income countries is important, then reducing crop-intensive meat consumption is even more pressing for the same reasons of conserving global food and environmental resources. Similar to the ways in which meat is a form of overconsumption and redistribution, it is also a form of food waste. Couple its inherent feed-to-food inefficiency with its highly perishable nature, and meat can easily be considered a "multiplier form of food waste."

Focusing on reducing food waste is important, but it is popular in part because it allows people to express their altruism without calling into question deeper issues of justice or threatening the basic tenets of our longstanding abuse of animals for food. As a standalone issue, it's just not asking much of people to eat leftovers and ugly produce. Reducing food waste has great potential benefit, but given the magnitude of threats to global hunger and food security, it needs to be implemented in addition to minimizing animal consumption, not instead of it.

Conclusion – Normalizing Justice and Compassion

More attention and details have been provided here about animal suffering relative to human suffering because even though our efforts to reduce world hunger are inadequate, at least it is widely accepted that hunger is a tragedy. With regards to animals, however, meat consumption is encouraged and celebrated, while the cruelty is defended and denied.

The casual killing and near universal consumption of animals by billions of people around the world continuously reinforces and normalizes the atrocities we commit against them. Justice, compassion, and global well-being would be dramatically increased by conceptually reframing meat away from something that is sought after to something that is shunned.

When we ignore or justify the routine horrors of animal farming and slaughter, we are complicit. Even if we are emotionally distressed by and opposed to the suffering of animals, our compassion and empathy are diminished by our active participation as we purchase the products that perpetuate the abuse. While we may be able to suppress our empathy and fragment our compassion to a degree, the process of normalizing one type of atrocity bolsters the routinization of injustice and violence more generally.

⁴¹ Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, "Food Wastage Footprint: Impacts on Natural Resources." 2013, p. 8. www.fao.org/docrep/018/i3347e/i3347e.pdf

Fortunately, the reverse is also true. What we choose to eat can instead reinforce and normalize justice and compassion. Our food choices are influential beyond the individual resources we conserve and animals we spare. Research has shown that a minority opinion can reach a “tipping point” when just ten percent of a population adopts it.⁴² After that, an idea can speed through society and create widespread behavioral change. The choices we make about our food can bring us closer to such a tipping point by popularizing plant-based foods among our friends, families, social institutions, and increasingly businesses and political decision-makers.

In this way, plant-based food choices and plant-friendly food policies become normalized. This increases plant-based food accessibility and desirability, which then creates a positive feedback loop capable of reinforcing itself up to and beyond progressively beneficial tipping points. The ripple effect of popularizing plant-based foods and reducing pro-meat biases can also create sweeping improvements on a global level, especially when new attitudes, policies, and priorities are adopted and promoted by nations with substantial amounts of power and influence.

Social justice cannot exist without food justice. The world is full of abuses beyond our control, but the immense, unnecessary, and unconscionable suffering of people and animals that results from our food system is something that we *can* positively affect by making better food choices.

If we want to reduce hunger, conserve natural resources, and mitigate climate change, removing animal products from our shopping carts is a powerful step we should take. If we want to end atrocities committed against animals, removing animal products from our shopping carts is an essential step we must take. If we are in leadership positions, prioritizing a shift away from animal-based foods through advocacy, policy, and personal example moves us toward the structural changes and tipping points necessary for widespread social justice.

Change is challenging, but it is important that we shift from compassion as a *feeling* to compassion as *action*. With power and privilege come ability and responsibility. For reasons of both justice and practicality, it is imperative that we acknowledge the ways in which our meat-centric consumption and meat-biased policies contribute to world problems. Abstaining from animal consumption is not a panacea, but it is a fundamental part of the social justice web, and a concrete way we can remove the most immediate, violent, and unjust actions from our daily lives.

⁴² Xie, J. et al, “Social Consensus Through the Influence of Committed Minorities.” *Physical Review E*, V. 84(1), July 2011. <http://pre.aps.org/abstract/PRE/v84/i1/e011130>