

2) Uncovering the link between chicken wings and the Amazonian forest

Problematic trend n° 2: global increase of meat consumption

What if something as simple and usual as a piece of meat was in fact at the center of many questions over the future of the planet? This question comes as two trends are at play: the first is that there are more and more people on the planet and by 2050, there will be 9 billion of us, requiring more food to be produced. The second trend is that meat and dairy products (milk, cheese, yogurt, etc.) are entering the diet of more people everyday a little bit more. And raising livestock takes a lot of resources. In short there are more people eating more meat and dairy while the resources at disposal, our one and only planet, remain the same.

The growth in consumption is particularly visible in countries like China but the biggest meat eaters live in Europe, United States and other industrialized countries where consumption is rather stagnating.

Raising more animals pose more and more sustainability challenges. Meat consumption is considered by UN experts as a driving cause of climate change and is frequently linked with the overuse or pollution of natural resources (water, land, ecosystems).¹

But how has meat become more problematic than transport for the climate?

The reason is that a lot of land is needed for animals. Deforestation for growing feedstuff like soybeans and maize, or extending pastoral lands releases enormous amounts of carbon dioxide. Moreover, livestock itself is also known to directly emit large amount of methane, a gas that warms the climate twenty-three times more than carbon dioxide does. Eating less meat can therefore be a very concrete step to mitigate climate change, and probably easier than transforming the entire transport system.

Learn also in the following story how our meat consumption is linked with environment and livelihoods in Latin America.

Definition corner

Sustainable development: Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Carbon dioxide (CO₂): a colorless gas that is formed by burning fuels, by the burning of plant matter, and by the act of breathing. In large amount, CO₂ contribute to climate change.

Climate change: a long-term change in the earth's climate, especially a change due to an increase in the average atmospheric temperature.

The story

From Paraguay to my plate

When Myriam passed the imposing door of the Czech school, she suddenly felt her mouth go dry. She was anxious about her speech to the students. „How were they gonna react?“

It was the same question that she was asking herself two weeks before when the plane took off from her country, Paraguay. As a small farmer, but also as a teacher, she believed that it was important to share with European youth what was happening in her region, but also in many other neighbouring countries like Brazil or Argentina. „Sharing and learning are the first steps to change the world“, she thought.

All the 120 seats were taken in the auditorium. Students were getting extra chairs from other classrooms to take part to the event. It was the first time they would do something special at the occasion of the World Food Day that happens every 16th of October, the day when all over the world, the human right to Food is celebrated.

When silence was made, she started : „My name is Myriam. I live in Paraguay, a country in latin America and I came here to speak about an important problem for my community but also many others in Latin America. This problem has only 4 letters: S-O-Y-A“

Myriam showed a picture. The picture was taken from the sky. One part seemed to be a forest, while the other part was a large field. She continued: „Today, in the region where I live, most of the fields are covered with soybean plantations. Big parts of the forests are cut down to make space for soy production. The same is happening in Brazil with the Amazonian forest. With the forest around, temperatures used to be lower because trees help to bring humidity from the soil in the air. Now we observe that the climate is hotter with these big fields. But what is the worse for us now, are the planes“

Planes? Students looked very confused. What could be the connection between planes and soy plantations?

She explained: sometimes, planes spray the fields with chemical products to kill the insects that may threaten the soy beans. It is called pesticides. They also use tractors to do it, but given how big are the fields, they use planes to go faster. We breath this air full of dangerous products for health, and the water we drink also start to be contaminated.

She added: This model of agriculture is called intensive or industrial agriculture and it is very different from the way I, my brother and the rest of my family are farming. We grow many different crops, not just one in mass scale. We grow in hamorny with nature, that means we use rather than against her, and we are producing in priority food for people.

A student raised his hand : for people? So, it means that soybeans are not for people? Who eats it then?

With shiny eyes, Maria said: Animals. Most of the soybeans are exported to your countries, in Europe. And this is not for human consumption but for pigs, chicken or cows. It is used mostly by intensive farms where animals are kept inside, and unfortunately this model of farming is growing in Europe.

Students could not keep silent, they were very surprised with what they heard. One teacher, Ms. Frelichová, the teacher of sciences had to ask for silence.

One student shook his hand and asked: „It means, all this soy is traversing the Atlantic ocean to get here? Does it mean there can be a link between my pork steak and the destruction of the Amazonian forest?“

„Yes, there is, unfortunately. Your food can link you to far away places, and sometimes we don't know it. You know, food changes the world. It can do it for better, or it can do it for worse. Worse it when it causes violation of human rights or destruction of the earth on which we all depend“.

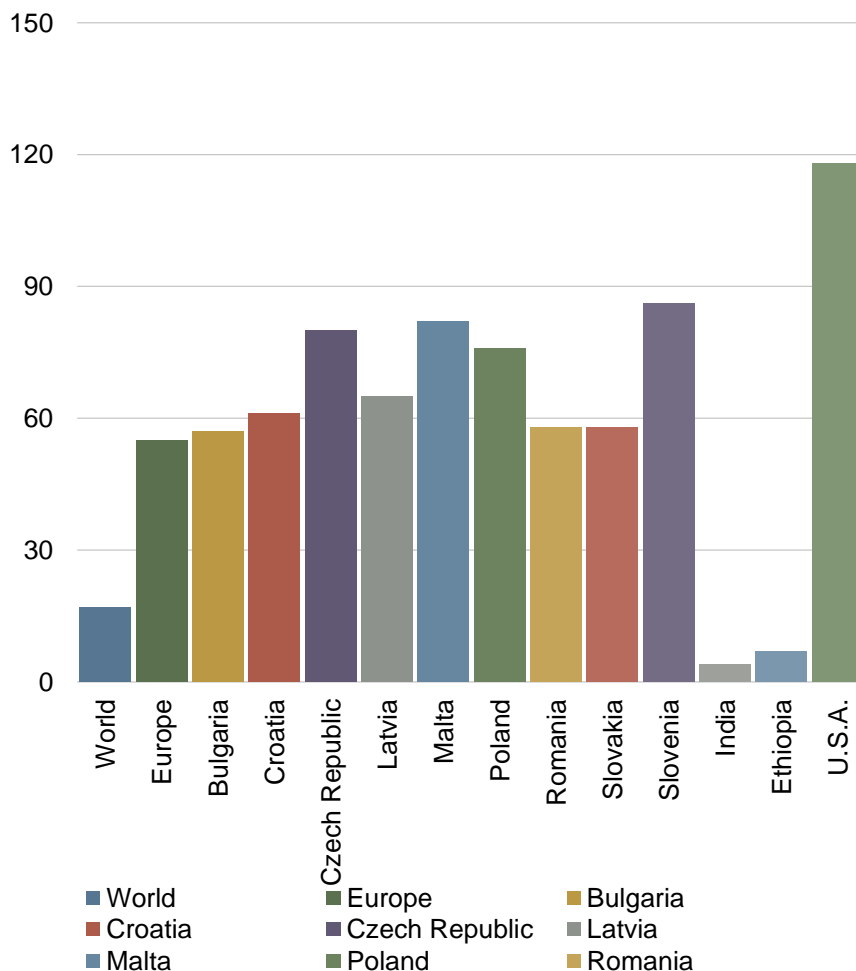
„And how do I choose better?“ asked the same student

Well, you are already on good tracks when you start asking questions, like you do now! Then, the next step is about choosing more consciously what you eat, and look for food that was produced in a way that respect your values. There are farmers in Europe who try to raise animals in ways that is respectful of life and nature, and instead of importing soy from my country, they let the animals graze outside or feed them with feedstuff they grow themselves. This is very wise, and we should thank them for this.

Questions to go further:

- What are the main causes of deforestation of the Amazonian forest?
- How much meat per week do we eat? How much does that make per year?
- How is the meat I eat produced, where does it come from?

Info on meat consumption levels in partner countries:



Do you know that...?

-Already one third of world arable land is used to feed livestock. By 2050, half of the arable land may be needed to feed livestock.²

-Only to feed European farm animals, we need 20 million hectares of land, which equals the size of Germany.³

- There is 2400 liters of water in a hamburger⁴

-The United Nations Environment Programme recommends to restrain the amount of meat we consume to 37kg per person per year worldwide⁵

Resources to go further:

- Campaign against the expansion of soy plantation (video :“Soy in the name of progress“)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8y3pPt3dlTQ>
- Article „UN says eat less meat“, in the Guardian
<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2008/sep/07/food.foodanddrink>
- Article „Eating less meat curbs climate change“, in the Guardian
<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/dec/03/eating-less-meat-curb-climate-change>
- Article on dairy farming and pollution of rivers
<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/oct/05/think-dairy-farming-is-benign-our-rivers-tell-a-different-story>
- Article on meat consumption and health
<http://www.theguardian.com/science/2014/mar/04/animal-protein-diets-smoking-meat-eggs-dairy>
- The Meat Atlas by Heinrich Boll Foundation and Friends of the Earth
<https://www.foeeurope.org/meat-atlas>

Connecting the dots:

- Eating less meat helps fighting climate change
- Eating less meat helps saving water
- Eating better meat (raised in sustainable maner) helps saving underground water, preserving soil quality and saving animal breeds



Climate Change



Water



Biodiversity

¹ Chatam House study , 2014

https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20141203LivestockClimateChangeBaileyFroggattWellesley.pdf?dm_i=1TY5,30JL0,BHZILT,AUGSP,1

² De Schutter, the meatification of diets, speech at the European Parliament, 3 December 2009

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/climatechange/doc/speeche_Mr_de_schutter.pdf

³ De Schutter, http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/docs/SRRTF_CAP_Reform_Comment.pdf

⁴ FAO, facts on virtual water <http://www.fao.org/nr/water/promotional.html>

⁵ UNEP, The environmental food crisis, p 26 http://www.grida.no/files/publications/FoodCrisis_lores.pdf