

RESTRUCTURING OUR FOOD SYSTEM FOR A HEALTHY WORLD

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Economics of Animal-Rearing incl. White, Blue & Pink Revolutions

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is an opportunity for us to analyse our food system, ideate and make changes for a healthier and more sustainable future. It is widely believed that the disease is zoonotic, which means that it got transferred to humans from the exotic animals stored in the 'wet markets' in Wuhan, China, the epicentre of the outbreak. Like SARS-CoV-2, SARS too was believed to have spread from civet cats to human beings in 2002. There are similar theories about Ebola and HIV. What lessons do these various outbreaks offer us?

The first is for us to rethink the ways in which we farm animals. India has the world's largest livestock population, is the largest producer of buffalo meat and produces about a 100 billion eggs annually. Animal agriculture is moving away from backyard operations to larger industrial facilities which aim to produce more meat with fewer resources. Industrialising animal agriculture comes at a huge cost to the environment, animals and to human beings. One concern is antibiotic resistance. According to the World Health Organization, the large volume of antibiotics given to farm animals contributed to the development of antimicrobial-resistant bacteria particularly in settings of intensive animal production.

A majority of Indian households buy meat from local meat shops which, much like the wet markets, follow no regulations in the way the animals are kept or slaughtered. Most of the standalone meat vendors do not follow the standards laid down by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). Further, while welfare standards of animals are often neglected, one thing is clear: immunocompromised animals are the most likely to pass on an infection. It is thus imperative that India understand the risk of zoonosis and antibiotic resistance in terms of following FSSAI regulations and adhering to welfare standards in animal husbandry.

The second lesson is to undertake greater investment in the alternate protein industry. India has a high rate of malnutrition among children under the age of five and is trying to combat this by encouraging meat production. With a paucity of space, this can only be done by giving a boost to industrial agriculture. Before India does that, it must explore the potential behind plant and cultivated meats. Plant-based meats are made from plants and are cholesterol- and antibiotic-free, but taste and feel like meat. Cultivated meat is produced by taking a small sample of animal cells and replicating them outside of the animal; the resulting product is real meat, but without the antibiotics, E. coli, salmonella, or animal waste. These foods represent an enormous opportunity to solve the problems of rampant malnutrition, low farmer incomes, antibiotic dependency, and inhumane factory farming of animals.

In the Western world, these plant-based meats are already popular and two plant-based companies – the Impossible Foods and Beyond Meat – won the Champions of Earth award, the United Nation's highest environmental honour. India, an agrarian economy, could export raw materials to make these products and feed its people.

Finally, we must understand the interconnectedness of the world. Advocates of animal rights have argued that within the welfare of animals lies the welfare of people. Every act we undertake has an impact on us all. Pursuant to global lockdowns, wild animal populations have returned to cities and pollution levels have dropped globally. We need to innovate and encourage technologies that allow us to maintain the standard of living we are used to while ensuring that

we are working towards a healthier world.

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