



**Lawrence Haddad** is Executive Director of the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), which is based in Geneva, Switzerland. He holds a PhD in Food Research from Stanford University, California, USA. In 2018, together with David Nabarro, Lawrence was awarded the World Food Prize.

## “ Eat less meat: if only it were that simple ”

“Eat less meat” is seen by many as a way of improving the health of the planet and its people. But the issue isn’t quite so simple – at least where the nutrition security and livelihoods of millions of people in the Global South are concerned. A call for a holistic view.

**By Lawrence Haddad**

It is not surprising that there is so much controversy swirling around the consumption of animal-sourced foods. First, different types of animal-sourced foods have different impacts on different types of nutrition outcome. Second, different types of production of different types of animals have a differential impact on greenhouse gas emissions and the use of natural resources. Third, animal production is an important livelihood strategy for many of the poorest individuals in the poorest countries. Fourth, there are important zoonosis spillovers from the clearance of land that wildlife depend on as well as food safety concerns from the improper handling of animal-source foods. Finally, animal welfare is a key issue in its own right, and different production systems have different impacts on animal wellbeing. Animal-sourced food production sits right at the heart of these overlapping issues, which often entail significant technical and political trade-offs between different goals and different groups of people.

In terms of nutrition outcomes, those who eat high levels of animal-sourced foods would be well-advised to temper their consumption.

Most national food-based dietary guidelines recommend moderating the consumption of red meat in particular, and the vast majority of guidelines advocate decreasing the consumption of processed meats as they have been identified as a risk factor for some diet related non-communicable diseases. Those who eat high levels of animal-sourced foods tend to be relatively well off because such foods tend to be more expensive and aspirational than plant-based foods. For those with low incomes, and especially infants and young children, the recommendations are to consume more animal-sourced foods since they are good sources of vitamins and minerals and are highly bio-available and usable by the body’s metabolic processes. The consumption of these types of foods has been shown to be significantly associated with reductions in under-five stunting, and in its 2020 *State of the World’s Children*, UNICEF laments the low consumption of these foods for under-five children with poor diet diversity scores.

The high rate of greenhouse gas emission from the production of some types of ani-

### Health, environmental and livelihood dimensions of animal-source foods production

		Dairy	Eggs
Health outcomes	Iron-deficiency/ anaemia	Neutral	Slightly reduces
	Micronutrient deficiencies	Reduces	Reduces
	Stunting	Reduces	Reduces
	Diabetes, cancer, heart disease	Likely reduces or neutral, but contested	Likely reduces or neutral, but contested
Environmental outcomes	GHG emissions	Moderate	Moderate
	Other environmental factors	Moderate to high	Moderate
Livelihoods	Poverty reduction, economic development	Important	Less important (production more industrialised)

Source: GAIN discussion paper series 5

mal-sourced foods has led to many in the media to call for a plant-based revolution in diets. “Eat less meat” is seen as a way of improving the health of the planet and its people. However, eating less meat would harm the health of some individuals in low-income contexts, especially children under five and low-income populations with a higher nutrient requirement, such as women of reproductive age and female adolescents. It is the higher income households – in all contexts – who would do well to reduce their consumption of animal-sourced foods for the sake of greenhouse gas reduction. “Eating less meat” would also harm the livelihoods of many low-income populations who depend on livestock, poultry and fishing. Rather, reductions in greenhouse gas from animal-source production could be achieved by more efficient production systems in low-income contexts, where animal waste is highest.

The challenge, then, for high-income countries is to reduce the consumption of animal-source foods (for their own health), and the challenge in lower-income countries is to improve the efficiency of animal source production (for the sake of the planet’s health). For middle-income countries, the challenge is to improve on both dimensions.

The food system community is coming to the realisation that these goals – and others such as

food safety, the reduction of zoonotic risks and animal health – are tightly connected. Much as different types of human rights are viewed as indivisible, we need to begin thinking and acting as if these different goals were indivisible. This is not to say that there are not trade-offs within and between countries when it comes to achieving them.

Decisions about food production and food consumption need to be informed by these trade-offs as well as the synergies. This points to a need for a significant increase in research that explores the attainment of these goals simultaneously, particularly for middle- and low-income countries because most of the limited evidence is from Europe and North America. The trade-offs and synergies are not only technical issues, they are also political. Different constituencies have different interests and different power. The technical and political economy issues also have to be identified, analysed and navigated within a multi-goal framework if food systems are to be transformed for people, animals and the planet. This is the challenge for the UN Food Systems Summit of 2021, and it is the challenge for all of us before – and after – the Summit.

Contact: lhaddad@gainhealth.org

For further reading, please see:

<https://www.gainhealth.org/resources/reports-and-publications/gain-discussion-paper-series-5-role-animal-source-foods-healthy-sustainable-equitable-food-systems>



## EATING LESS MEAT

would harm the livelihoods of many low-income populations who depend on livestock, poultry and fishing.

### and consumption

Animal-Source Foods			
Fish and Seafood	Meat		
	Unprocessed red	Processed red	White
Slightly reduces	Strongly reduces	??	Slightly reduces
Reduces	Reduces	??	Reduces
Reduces	Reduces	??	Reduces
Reduces	Likely increases, but contested	Increases	Likely neutral
Moderate (with wide range)	High, but highly variant by setting/system	High, but highly variant by setting/system	Moderate
?? (highly variant)	High, but highly variant by setting/system	High, but highly variant by setting/system	Moderate to high
Important but geographically concentrated	Important	??	Less important (production more industrialised)