

Discussion Session 2 – The current food system conversation

Discussion of Associate Professor Van Zanten's talk was dominated by the question of how circular agriculture principles would be applied in New Zealand, which has very different animal production systems compared to the Netherlands. In Europe, there is a far higher proportion of industrial, indoor-housed livestock compared to New Zealand, which has largely extensive, pastoral grazing livestock. Moreover, other parts of the world with non-Western diets will have very different livestock systems and waste streams.

Questions were raised about whether sufficient food waste and by-products are generated in New Zealand to support circularity, and how these feeds might be transported to livestock, given the large distances between densely populated regions and agricultural regions. How would transitions to these practices be applied? What incentives are there beyond reduced environmental footprint? Furthermore, what are the full outcomes of circularity on the environment, beyond the greenhouse gases discussed by the speaker?

Others were concerned about the risks of circularity done poorly, leading to biosecurity or food safety risks. There may also be negative trade-offs not touched on by the speaker, such as animal welfare impacts.

From a nutritional perspective, some in the audience were interested in the idea of considering land use from a nutrient perspective. They wished to know how nutrients moved through the circular system, from crop to people to waste and back again. Would circularity have an impact on the nutrient quality of the foods produced? It was also asked what proportions of food waste and by-products were best used for feed versus fertiliser in a circular system. Will this change in the future if we are able to reduce food waste, as we are currently striving to do?

Finally, there were comments on the use of land in New Zealand. Some asked whether we need to revisit some of our land use choices in this country, and the use of highly productive land for housing was also raised as a challenge.

Moving to the talk from Professor Leroy, many in the audience had not thought about the food system and meat from social, cultural and psychological perspectives before. One individual described the talk as 'intense'.

Many found it very interesting to think of the food system as a cultural construct: 'we cannot ignore the social side of food'. There was agreement that a lot of talk about extreme views exists in food systems and dietary debate, rather than consensus. Polarised debates are common, not just regarding food. There was agreement that we need to be balanced in our discussion, with less black and white statements. A plant versus animal approach to the conversation is the wrong approach. One attendee asked 'why plant *or* animals, not plant *and* animals?' Another wished to know whether the perception of meat in New Zealand aligned with that of Europe, or whether it was more or less extreme here.

There was agreement with Professor Leroy's assertion that many think about eating hamburgers rather than eating animals. However, this was countered by the agreement that many New Zealand communities are still closely connected to producing food.

The delegates asked whether the disconnect between production and eating is due to less people being employed in food production, and whether the loss of family land was leaving us out of touch with the land. These phenomena also result in a loss of knowledge about nutrition and food practices, and a move away from traditional, balanced, nutritious diets. A better connection between food producers and consumers was called for.

Separately, it was also agreed that many in Western societies have become selective on what parts of the animal they will eat. However, the valuable question of how much of this discussion applies in the developing world was also raised. It is essential to also have a whole-world view that includes the perspectives of the less wealthy. Many people do not have a choice in how they get their food, and nutrition or health is not a consideration of theirs. These perspectives were not well covered in the talks.

Some in the audience wished to hear more acknowledgment of the diverse reasons that individuals have for avoiding animal foods, beyond those discussed by Professor Leroy. Dietary choice is driven by different factors for different people. These comments were made with particular emphasis on the environmental reasons for avoiding animal foods. What is the true impact of decreasing meat consumption on the environment?

Looking to the future, one attendee asked what the next phase in the social perception of meat consumption might be. This is tied into the discussion in the room about communication and recent media drives to extreme perspectives. How do we regain the narrative in the post-truth world? What is the role of the media and social media in informing the public on challenging issues like meat production and consumption? Are they partially to blame for drumming up extreme views with simplified messages? A similar notion is the idea of extremes around organic versus conventional, or fat-free versus full-fat.

The delegates were again in agreement that simplified messages about non-extreme views are needed. Some were concerned that it may be too late to change the minds of younger generations. One attendee was worried that extreme messaging was driving more children to adopt vegetarian or vegan diets, with dire consequences for their nutrition and development. All of this emphasised the importance of being reminded about the degree to which human values impact on our discussions about food. This point is critical, as having effective conversations is essential if we are to make progress on 'feeding our future'. Many in the audience wished to hear what possible solutions to the currently divisive debate might be.

The current role of meat was questioned by the audience. It was noted that much of the debate thus far had centred on protein, but there are other important elements to good nutrition, such as fibre, that need to be considered. We in New Zealand have always assumed that the wealthier consumer will always demand meat and dairy – but is this true? One asserted that we put a lot of effort and money into protecting and defending the status quo, rather than embracing innovation.

Overall, there was agreement that effort should be focussed on solutions, rather than just the causes of the challenges. Sustainable diets will be part of the solution, and these need to be culturally acceptable, as diet plays a key part in identity. The true problems to be tackled from a nutrition and health perspective are overconsumption, particularly of highly processed foods.

*Discussion summaries were collated by Dr Nick Smith, based on written notes collected from the tables in the room and video recordings of the facilitated discussion sessions on the day.