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Editorial



Dear EurSafe Members,

Once again I have the honour to introduce you to a new issue of EurSafe News. And this time, there is more than the pure content of the Newsletter that I can present to you. You will certainly have noticed the brand new layout of this issue, and the way it has reached you.

But, this is only the beginning of a new EurSafe news era. Starting this Autumn, we are working hard to bring to you an updated EurSafe website, with which we hope to be able to bring a new layer of EurSafe related news to our members (and others). Both the new EurSafe News layout and the new website are sparkling proof that EurSafe, at its 10th anniversary, is still young and vibrant is ever.

I wish you all an enjoyable and productive Autumn, and hope to hear from you soon!

Stef Aerts
Issue editor

Thematic Section – ‘The ethical merits of vegetarianism promotion’

Meat ethics

Tobias Leenaert, EVA
(Ethical Vegetarian
Alternative)

Meat is under attack, on several fronts. Celebrities like Paul McCartney and Moby are campaigning against it, and more and more scientific studies support the idea of decreasing meat production and consumption for several reasons.

Ghent, Belgium, even became the first city in the world to officially support a weekly vegetarian day.

Ghent: an social experiment in meat reduction

Ghent, Belgium, is a vibrant city of about 240.000 inhabitants. It takes pride in a lively student scene and is considered the greenest city in the country. Ghent recently made world headlines when it officially announced Thursdays to be vegetarian days, for the health both of its citizens and of the planet.

The 'Thursday Veggie Day' campaign was developed by the Belgian vegetarian association EVA (Ethical Vegetarian Alternative) and aims to familiarize as wide an audience as possible with the benefits of eating less meat, by proposing a very feasible and concrete action: don't eat meat or fish one day a week. On Thursday, for instance.

There is no compulsion to eat or not eat anything and everyone is free to do as he or she wishes. The campaign is just a matter of active stimulation. One hundred thousand vegetarian street maps have been distributed, and all restaurants received a brochure showing them why and how to put vegetarian dishes on the menu. In October, the campaign will start in 35 city schools: on Thursday, the meal will be vegetarian by default. Educational materials are being developed to point out the benefits of eating less meat. These are numerous, and we touch briefly on the most important ones.

Feeding 9 billion people

Is Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, right when he calls our present high meat consumption 'unethical'? De Schutter is talking about meat's role in the global hunger problem. While roughly one billion people in the world are malnourished, we convert about 40% of the world's cereals into meat at a highly inefficient rate. The high demand for meat makes grain less affordable for the poorest, and requires inefficient use of valuable agricultural land. Mainly a consequence of increased standards of living in countries like India or China, demand for meat is expected to double by 2050. In any case, the present western consumption of meat is not possible on a global scale.

Environmental cost

Meat production comes at a very significant environmental cost. According to the FAO (the UN Food and Agriculture organisation), 'the livestock sector emerges as one of the top two or three most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale from local to global. The findings of this report suggest that it should be a major policy focus when dealing with problems of land degradation, climate change and air pollution, water shortage and water pollution and loss of biodiversity (...). The impact is so significant that it needs to be addressed with urgency. Major reductions in impact could be achieved at reasonable cost' (Livestock's Long Shadow, FAO 2006)

Animal suffering

How ethical is the eating of animals? It's a much debated issue in contemporary moral philosophy. But the question is almost as old as humanity, so to speak, and the gist of the issue is well summarized by Plutarch: 'But for the sake of a little mouthful of flesh, we deprive a soul of the sun and light and of that proportion of life and time it had been born into the world to enjoy.' We can rightfully question a 'little mouthful of flesh' as a justification for killing a sentient being, of finishing off a life. What changed since Plutarch's time, moreover, is that, for one thing, alternatives for meat have become much more easily available. For another, added to the equation are the other damaging effects of meat production, briefly explained in this article. Thirdly, animals are mistreated and killed on a scale that 's never been seen before: we kill about 60 billion of them per year, globally. That's about 115.000 animals per minute. How much do they matter?

Health

As we usually associate ethics with the effects of our actions on other people, our own personal health is not obviously seen as an ethical issue. However, as health care costs are reaching untenable levels, in the future we might not be able to care adequately for our sick. Much more emphasis on prevention of western 'affluence diseases' is needed. High meat consumption is associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes and several cancers. According to a study by the World Health Organisation, a decrease of just one percent in saturated fat intake among Europeans, could avoid almost 13.000 deaths from cardiovascular disease.

Moral luxuries and moral requirements

In light of the above arguments – which barely even touch on the subject - it surely seems that a solid case can be made against our present high meat consumption, if not against meat eating in general. Still, although the benefits are many and are becoming clearer every day, eating less or no meat is at worst seen as silliness or merely a matter of personal choice, and at best as what in moral philosophy is called a supererogatory act: something that is good to do but not morally required to be done.

What is and is not morally required is not cut in stone, but is a reflection of the moral accomplishments of the majority. Slowly but surely, we are examining the ethics of food, even though most of us still consider what we eat to be strictly our own business. Things change, however, and so do our morals. A time may come, somewhere in the next century perhaps, when our great great grandchildren will look back upon our present eating habits with both wonder and disgust. It would be a time in which psychologists, sociologists and historians will try to find out how on earth we ever came to raise and kill 60 billion animals a year, using – even as a billion people went hungry - a significant part of the food supply, and turning them into unhealthy meat products, killing people by the millions, while bringing irreparable damage to our planet.

Why do we eat meat, and why so much of it? Because animals taste good, because we are accustomed to it, because it's part of our culture. As to politicians and their propensity towards government action, they are not likely to meddle with what's on people's plates, and surely do not want to further inflict damage on an already suffering industry by telling people to eat less meat. Ghent is a brave exception.

It's up to each conscientious and honest citizen of the world to assess the value of these arguments. As it is now, considering the scale and its impact, meat consumption may very well be the number one moral blind spot in our collective consciousness.



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EurSafe Executive Committee Update

First things first: The board is happy to welcome two new board members: Dr. Kristin Hagen (Germany) and Dr. Anna Olsson (Portugal). Both were elected unanimously during the General Assembly in Nottingham. We are glad that we no are on full strength again.

Furthermore, the new logo and housestyle has been introduced during the conference. The new logo aims to include the aspects of food (reflected in the grain and the form of a plate), Europe (the map and the blue colour), sustainability (the green colour), and the open and independent character of the society. From this issue on, the newsletter has been restyled in line with the new housestyle. Later this year the website will also be improved and redesigned.

In the next months the themes from the 2007-2010 strategy will be further elaborated. Especially EurSafe's role in teaching and the network activities of EurSafe will get special attention. On top of this, the board will give its support and feedback to the organisers of the EurSafe 2010 conference in Bilbao, September 2010.

Franck L.B. Meijboom
Secretary

The Vonne Lund Student Award in 2009

The Board of EurSafe has decided to create the Vonne Lund Student Award in memory of Vonne Lund, who died from cancer in June. She was a EurSafe member since the first congress in Wageningen in 1999, a dedicated researcher with a doctoral degree in animal husbandry agronomy and a deep personal interest in ethical issues and animal welfare, as well as in contributing to make the world a better and more just place to live in.

Among the abstracts submitted as student presentations, and the three student posters, the jury has – after intensive discussions – decided to give the prize for best abstract to Juda Omukaga for his abstract “The human rights approach to the problem of hunger: an ethical reflection on the thoughts of Asbjörn Eide on the right to food”. In this paper

Omukaga focus on a most central issue— food security – as related to our ethical responsibility for present and future generations in terms of social and economic human rights . In his clear writing Omukaga not only makes the complexity of the issue and Eides thinking justice, but also argues for the urgent need to transform justified ethical claims and statements to practice, in order to save lives. This approach is in line with the topic of this year's congress, with EurSafes general call for reflection on the situation on the world and incentives to practical improvements, as well as with Vonne Lunds work for a more sustainable world.

The board of EurSafe is further very pleased to give the poster award to Nathalie B. Cleton for her informative and well structured poster “A framework to address conflicts in veterinary responsibilities”. Also Cleton pointes at a crucial point of ethical responsibility for animal welfare which needs improvement by bridging the gap between knowledge and practice through ethics. In many respects this is close to the scientific work of Vonne Lund. Hereby the two award winners mirror the broad scope of ethical issues regarding agriculture and food dealt with within EurSafe. Very well done, and our joyful congratulations!

The EurSafe board,
though Helena Röcklinsberg

Conferences & Symposia 2009

October 2009

URBAN International Conference: Poverty in Medium and Small Cities of Developing Countries

Lumbumbashi, DRC (To be confirmed)

<http://www.biw.kuleuven.be/personeel/documenten/Urban2009.doc>

November 6-7, 2009

10th EMBO/EMBL Science & Society Conference

Food, sustainability and plant science - a global challenge

EMBL Heidelberg, Germany

<http://www.embo.org/policy-and-society/science-society/conferences/2009.html>

November 12-14, 2009

The Integration of Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development in the Context of Climate Change, the Energy Crisis and Food Insecurity

Faculty of Law, Economics & Social Sciences of Agadir, Morocco

<http://2009-international-conference.synthasite.com>

November 13-15, 2009

Fourth International Conference on Applied Ethics

Hokkaido University, Sapporo, Japan

<http://ethics.let.hokudai.ac.jp/en/events.html>

February 1-5, 2010

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Universitat de Barcelona, Spain

<http://www.ub.es/dpfilsa/food2010.html>

July 28-31, 2010

10th World Congress of Bioethics: Bioethics in a Globalised World

The Division of Ethics of Science and Technology Sector for Social and Human Sciences UNESCO

Suntec Singapore International Convention and Exhibition Centre, Singapore

<http://www.bioethics-singapore.org/wcb2010/>

Publications

New Books

Sustainable animal production

The challenges and potential developments for professional farming

2009 – 496 pages – hardback – ISBN-13: 978-90-8686-099-9

edited by: A. Aland, F. Madec

Precision livestock farming '09

2009 – 368 pages – hardback – ISBN-13: 978-90-8686-112-5

edited by: C. Lokhorst, P.W.G. Groot Koerkamp

Ethical futures: bioscience and food horizons

2009 – 448 pages – paperback – ISBN-13: 978-90-8686-115-6

edited by: Kate Millar, Pru Hobson West, Brigitte Nerlich

The food economy

Global issues and challenges

2009 – 192 pages – paperback – ISBN-13: 978-90-8686-109-5

edited by: Frank Bunte, Hans Dagevos

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You are kindly invited to send any relevant contributions, conference calls, publication reviews, etc. to the editors.