

5. Ecology and food economy

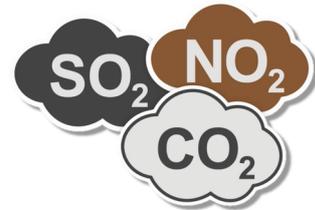
5.1 The rise of agriculture: Challenges for our diet and the environment

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Agriculture: Leads for the future

The demand for food products is constantly increasing. The challenge we face is to increase agricultural production while limiting damage to the environment.

Agriculture emits greenhouse gases, responsible for global warming, and contributes to the degradation of soil and the pollution of water, thus decreasing reserves. So, how can we ensure food security for a constantly increasing global population?



SUSTAINABLE FARMING



Sustainable farming aims to satisfy food requirements by guaranteeing the lasting quality of natural resources so that they can also feed future generations. It seeks to reduce the environmental impact of agricultural activities and to protect biodiversity, water and soil. Organic farming is the most widely known form of sustainable farming.

Although large organic farms are beginning to emerge, particularly in the United States, organic farming is generally practised on relatively small areas. It currently requires more labour and labourers, and renders lower yields than conventional farming. With the techniques currently used in organic farming, it would be necessary to cultivate a larger area to give the same amount of produce as conventional farming. The world's currently exploitable areas would not suffice.



INCREASE IN YIELDS AND RATIONALISATION

Integrated farming can offer a solution. Inspired by organic farming, its objective is to achieve ecological intensification, which means reconciling food requirements and respect for the environment.

This approach aims to improve overall yields, by producing greater quantities on a same surface for the same cost, whilst integrating a new element, that of neutral or reduced ecological impact.

This involves rationalising farms, i.e. improving the efficiency of labour and machines, and the performance of farming techniques. Such rationalisation of agriculture also aims at sustainability, by preserving the environment and natural

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resources. This requires the development of new agricultural techniques and practices, which master the use of pesticides, fertilisers and water. The use of renewable energies will also contribute to the long-term sustainability of production processes.

THE CHALLENGES OF STOCKBREEDING

While it is evident that the stockbreeding industry must find solutions to reduce its contribution to global warming, we, as individuals, can all play our part too, by adjusting our consumption of animal products. In western countries, where meat consumption is often much higher than actual requirements, one solution would be simply to reduce consumption of meat.



Favouring plant proteins would complement this approach, especially since arable farming is generally more environmentally friendly, in particular because it gives higher yields. It is estimated that it would take 10 kg of plant protein to produce a single kilogram of beef protein. Other sources of protein are currently being developed: In the near future, insect cultivation could represent a partial alternative to classical stockbreeding.

It is important to note, however, that stockbreeding plays a significant role in the food ecosystem. For a start, it transforms proteins that are of average quality for humans into proteins of better quality. It would be necessary to consume 15 to 25% more plant proteins than animal proteins to cover our basic requirements in amino acids.



In addition, stockbreeding recovers a percentage of plant production, as humans cannot consume a substantial proportion of food used as animal fodder. Bred extensively, animals help maintain landscapes and pastures, and fertilise the soil with their droppings. They thus play a role in biodiversity and can even produce renewable energy. In any case, they are part of our culture and society, our culinary heritage and our expertise.



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Once again, a reduction in the consumption of products of animal origin, and hence in their production, can only be envisaged if all these elements are taken into consideration, sensibly.

LOSS AND WASTE

In terms of food losses and waste, initial studies show losses in all sectors and at all stages, from production to storage, transformation and distribution. A first approach would be to measure the losses correctly and understand the exact reasons for such losses.

Where cereal production is concerned, this could, for example, consist of improving the use of harvesting equipment, as incorrect settings on corn harvesters already result in a 4% loss.



As for distribution, this may include initiatives such as donating unsold products that are still consumable to various associations, prioritising products with a short use-by period on supermarket shelves, selling products in bulk (loose, not packaged), singly or in small quantities, and recovering waste plant matter to produce biogas.

Finally, we, as consumers, could stop buying more than necessary and learn more about how to better store our food.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we addressed the challenges agriculture currently faces, in particular with regard to increasing production to cope with population growth, and the environmental impact. Sustainable farming is constantly improving. Its aim is to make agricultural techniques more efficient, to increase production and improve yields, while working towards reducing environmental cost and greenhouse gas emission.