

Chapter 10

Leading With Compassion on Global Issues

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The choice now facing humanity is extinction or regeneration. Looked at through the lens of the four seasons, our society is currently living through summer, an endless party, a time of limitless consumption as if the planet has no boundaries. Yet, the browning leaves of autumn are starting to show as anxiety grows over the climate and nature crises. Carry on as we are, and we face a perpetual winter. Covid-19 gave us a collective taste of that perpetual winter. It showed how society is vulnerable, fragile, not to be taken for granted.

But how do we get to a new spring? The great news is there are beautiful, life-affirming, compassionate solutions already at hand that can take us to that never-ending spring.

Focal Points

We need to move quickly. If we are to have any chance at all of addressing pressing planetary emergencies of climate and the collapse of nature, or achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we will have to focus on where we can have the most impact.

So, let's ask ourselves, then, what is the biggest land user on the planet? It's food. What is responsible for a third of greenhouse gas emissions more than any other sector? It's food. What accounts for 70% of all freshwater use in the world? It's food.

What this tells us is that the answer to addressing the climate and biodiversity crises, water conservation issues, and meeting the SDGs lies with our food system.

When it comes to food, animal welfare, and the environment, we're starting to see how things are intertwined. There is a growing recognition of the principle of One Health, One Welfare: that the future health of people relies on the wellbeing of animals and a thriving ecosystem. That we are all in it together.

Joining the dots with an open mind should quickly get us to the point where we can see that being cruel to animals harms us all. This was brought home to me when out walking the fields near the farm hamlet that is my home in the south of England.

Walking on the Moon

It was early morning, and a tractor was pulling a plough. Back and forth it went, ploughing its lonely furrows. Behind the tractor, dust clouds spiralled and caught the sun, creating an aura. A timeless symbol of the season. Only, something was missing: there were no screeching gulls following the plough in search of worms.

I took a closer look. The tractor was ploughing across a footpath, giving me a bird's-eye view of the newly upturned soil. As I stared down, do you know what I saw? Nothing.

There were no worms, beetles, or bugs desperate to get back into their world turned upside down. The soil was lifeless. It was like sand. We could have been walking on the moon. That field should have had millions of worms in every hectare, in every patch the size of a football pitch.

There should have been 13,000 species of life with a collective weight of an elephant: five tonnes. But instead, there was nothing. The field was planted with maize (corn), a crop commonly used as animal feed. Treated with chemical pesticides and artificial fertilisers, the soil had degenerated and was washing into the river.

It reminded me of seeing flowing green oceans of maize corn in the American Midwest of Nebraska, much of which was destined for the feed troughs of factory-farmed chickens, pigs and cattle. I remember seeing feedlots. Hundreds of cows and calves stood in barren pens, not a blade of grass in sight. Despite the hot summer sun, they had no shade. I watched as they jostled in the searing heat, trying to get in each other's shadow for some respite.

It was a potent example of the factory farming regime that now ravages the planet.

Industrial Farming

Industrial agriculture is a recent phenomenon. It was but a single human lifetime ago when we started removing animals from the land to be caged, crammed and confined. Vast acreages of cropland elsewhere were then devoted to growing their feed. Factory farming was born.

Far from making food, factory farming wastes it. Animals are not efficient in converting crops into meat, milk and eggs. They waste most of the food value in terms of calories and protein in the process. In this way, we squander enough food to feed four billion people – that's half of humanity alive today.

What has become obvious is that the way that we produce and consume food has changed beyond all recognition. It has become more industrialized and more focused around animal-sourced foods. That change has brought us to the point where intensive food production is now the biggest driver of wildlife declines worldwide. Through the factory farming of animals, it has become the world's biggest cause of animal cruelty.

It is also what is undermining the very thing we need to produce food in the future soil, which is why the UN has rightly warned that if we carry on as we are, we have just sixty harvests left in the world's soil. No soil, no food – game over.

The choice before us, then, is extinction or regeneration, which was the theme of the major conference organised by Compassion in World Farming in partnership with IPES-Food and other multi-sectoral partners in London in May 2023. It was a conference that brought together thought leaders, academics, farming practitioners and those working on the front line of new and regenerative solutions to talk about how the food system needs to change.

UN Food Systems Summit

The conference was building on the groundbreaking work of the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021, which was a crucial milestone for saving the planet. World leaders gathered for what was billed as a ‘people’s summit,’ it brought together a wide diversity of voices globally, including young people, women, food producers, Indigenous Peoples, civil society, researchers, private sector, finance and governments. Its stated aim was to focus on transforming food systems to drive our recovery from Covid-19 and get us back on track to achieve all 17 SDGs by 2030.

Lord Zac Goldsmith, Minister for the Environment, spoke on behalf of the UK; his was just one of more than 90 government statements delivered at the summit. “Our food systems are heaping costs on future generations and on the planet,” Goldsmith warned. The way we produce and consume food is “fundamentally unsustainable, increasing the risk of zoonoses and the threat of antimicrobial resistance and putting impossible pressure on freshwater, forests, biodiversity, climate and weather systems.” He continued by referring to the independent review of the nation’s food strategy together with action on food waste and plans to switch farm subsidies to support good environmental stewardship.

Like other governmental leaders, Goldsmith called for global action to feed everyone whilst tackling the growing challenges of health, climate and biodiversity loss. There was no shortage of fighting talk coming out of the summit.

The man behind the summit, the UN’s Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, framed the problem saying, “We are waging a war against nature - and reaping the bitter harvest. Ruined crops, dwindling incomes and failing food systems... The war on the planet must end, and food systems can help us build that peace.”

The gauntlet to world leaders was well and truly thrown down.

Changing the Narrative

What the summit achieved was a changing of the narrative, moving away from ‘business as usual with a few tweaks’ to one that speaks to the need for transformational approaches to food system reform. It felt like we were entering a new era of thinking.

Thirty years ago, the paradigm was very much that things have ‘never been better’ and that anyone raising issues like hunger, wildlife declines or animal cruelty was being annoyingly political. Radical even. All we could hope for were tweaks to the system to make it less bad. Fundamental change was but a pipedream.

If government interventions at the summit were anything to go by, official attitudes are changing. A procession of national leaders queued up to recite reasons for food system change. The emphasis was on things like aiming for the provision of school meals for every child, zero food waste and agricultural innovation. Profoundly good and much needed changes.

Yet what seemed obvious was that the changes governments were gravitating toward were low

hanging fruit rather than fundamental.

Blind Spot

Much rarer were statements offering genuine game-changers, such as moving away from industrial animal agriculture and tackling diets over-reliant on livestock products. The reality is that without moving away from factory farming, most of those UN SDGs will remain seriously out of reach as will addressing the growing crises of climate, nature, and pollution. So far, it remains largely a universal governmental blind spot. Without tackling factory farming and associated diets heavy in animal products, our global society will continue heading toward an existential threat.

Scientists are clear that we have less than a decade left to cut emissions to keep global warming within 1.5 degrees Celsius of temperature rise deemed ‘safe’. As it stands, government pledges made at COP26 leave the world on course for global temperatures to increase by 2.4 degrees Celsius.

Climate change will hit developing countries and people on low incomes disproportionately hard. It will also affect animals, not only leading to extinctions but greater suffering caused by flooding, drought and wildfire disasters like those seen in Australia, Pakistan and the Amazon.

As for nature, if we carry on as we have done for the last half a century, the world is on course for almost total obliteration of our wildlife by 2040. At the same time, tropical forests, vital as the lungs of the Earth, are under enormous pressure, not least through expansion of industrial agriculture. Current rates of deforestation look set to erase an area of forest the size of half the EU by 2040. On top of this, the soil – the very thing that stores so much atmospheric carbon and water, as well as producing most of our food – is disappearing, with industrial agriculture being largely responsible. By 2040, in a world with more than a billion more mouths to feed, there could be a third less soil, with devastating implications for food production.

Decisive Decade

The 2020s have been described as the ‘decisive decade’ on climate change. The available evidence shows that without ending factory farming and associated high-meat diets, it will be followed by the ‘desperate decade’ of the 2030s where government leaders scramble belatedly to do what they should have done today. Urgent action is needed to stave off a planetary tailspin and the ‘deadly decades’ that would follow.

What the data tells us is that shifting to regenerative farming and diets much less dependent on animal products needs to happen now, with the utmost urgency. Leaving it beyond 2040 will be too late.

Largely Absent

Outside the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit and its associated Stocktaking Moment in 2023, transforming food systems barely gets a mention. It’s so often overlooked when talking about how to achieve the SDGs. It hardly figures in global talks on biodiversity or climate, rendering the latest

COP (Conference of the Parties) a copout. It's the elephant in the room.

Addressing the elephant in the room means facing up to the prospect that as things stand, our over-consumption of meat alone could trigger catastrophic climate change. This is why we need a food system based not on cruelty, extraction and decline, but on putting back into nature's bank account, working in harmony with Mother Nature, and respecting animal sentience as key to a future-fit food system. As things stand, the one thing we can be sure of is that big change is inevitable. We simply cannot go on as we are.

Beyond Sustainability

In a world with more mouths to feed and shrinking planetary resources in terms of land, water and climate stability, being able to do tomorrow what we do today – the definition of sustainability – won't be enough.

Instead, we need solutions that are regenerative – working with nature in ways that put back by rebuilding soils, water and wildlife biodiversity while producing nutritious food in ways that ensure all animals can flourish from high welfare.

Embracing a Positive Future

This is why we need those beautiful, life-affirming, compassionate solutions – which can be summed up as the three 'R's': Regeneration, Rethinking Protein, and Rewilding, not least of all the soil.

Regeneration of the countryside through high-welfare, nature-friendly or regenerative farming involves restoring animals to the land as rotational grazers or foragers where they can express their natural behaviours – running, flapping, grazing – making for happier animals with better health, too. Regenerative farming cuts reliance on chemical pesticides, fertilisers and antibiotics, reducing costs to farmers and creating a varied landscape bursting with wildflowers that lure back pollinating insects like bumblebees as well as providing seeds and insects for birds and other wildlife.

We need to rethink protein by reducing our consumption of meat and milk from animals. Combining regenerative farming with a serious reduction in the number of farmed animals can create food systems that are genuinely sustainable. Based on scientific assessments within the EAT-Lancet Planetary Health Diet, we can see that saving the planet will require drastic reductions in consumption of animal-sourced foods. Evidence shows that by the middle of the century, our consumption of animal products globally must be reduced by more than half. In high-consuming regions such as the West, deeper cuts will be needed. For example, the UK and EU would need reductions of two-thirds, while the US would need a reduction of four-fifths.

By rethinking protein, meat from farmed animals would come only from higher welfare, nature-friendly regenerative farms. Consumption of animal-sourced foods would be reduced through replacement with plant-based and other alternative proteins, including cultivated meat and precision fermentation, together with eating more fruit, vegetables, and legumes.

We need to rewild the soil returning animals to the land regeneratively as part of mixed rotational farms where they can turbocharge soil fertility. Farmed animals could be living their best lives, huge amounts of carbon could be locked up in healthy soil, much more water would be conserved for crops, and a vast array of biodiversity would be restored to thriving farmland.

Towards a New Day

We urgently need a new dawn for animals, people and the planet. The big question is: how do we get there, and fast?

The major challenge and opportunity ahead of us is to integrate transformation of food systems as a central theme, not just in the UN Food Systems Summit Stocktaking Moment but also in global conversations on climate, water, biodiversity and achieving the SDGs. In this way, each conference would be building on the last, helping to address the elephant in the room – food system transformation – in ways that could truly help to build the outcome of the other conferences.

Ending the war on the planet and building peace through nature-friendly food systems means moving away from damaging and unsustainable industrial agriculture. It means moving towards more balanced diets, avoiding the prospect where our over-consumption of meat alone could trigger catastrophic climate change. It means embracing food systems that are truly nature-based, animal-friendly, inclusive, livelihood-sustaining, and carbon-capturing. It means making decent, nutritious, planet- and animal-friendly food a basic human right, not just a privilege for those who can afford it. It means moving to an agro-ecological and regenerative food future.

If existing forums on climate, biodiversity, food security and the SDGs are to have any hope of being successful, then what is hugely needed is a dedicated UN forum on food – a framework agreement on transforming food systems toward a new agro-ecological era.

Key Stakeholder Actions

So, who needs to be involved and how? The answer lies in us all playing our part: governments and the EU, business, finance, the UN and civil society working in partnership to transform the food system. It lies in governments creating policy environments for change, using directives, incentives and subsidies to steer food and farming away from cages and confinement toward this new animal and nature-friendly era. The opportunities for greening food production are enormous – take subsidies, for example. Globally, governments provide \$700 billion a year in farm subsidies, more than \$1m per minute, much of which currently drives industrial farming, the climate crisis and destruction of wildlife. That money could be far better spent on regenerative farming and reducing demand for meat.

Food companies must set measurable targets for the reduction of animal-sourced foods, shunning those from the factory farm altogether. Cage-free commitments are a key prerequisite to humane and sustainable food. Moreover, the financial sector must ensure funding is available to support the transition toward welfare-friendly and nature-positive practices.

Policymakers need to recognise that big change is inevitable. We no longer have the luxury of asking if we can afford to change. Leadership is therefore needed at the highest level through an overarching UN Global Agreement to transform food systems. Such an agreement should recognize food's central role in the success of existing conventions, not least on climate and biodiversity. The agreement should move agriculture away from factory farming and recognise animal welfare as an essential element of sustainable food systems and thereby a future for all.

We are beyond the eleventh hour. We have just 8 harvests left to save the SDGs. We have just sixty harvests left to save the future for our children. For animals, people and the planet, the clock is ticking. There is no time to lose. What we do now will define the next one thousand years. Let's get to it.