

# IS VEGANISM THE SOLUTION TO CLIMATE CHANGE?

*A Dialogue among Food Activists  
by M. Alejandra Morena\**



\* This article is based on interviews carried out by M. Alejandra Morena with Vanessa Álvarez González, Maresa Bossano, Line Niedeggen, C. Sathyamala and Marité Álvarez in February 2020.

M. Alejandra Morena is a feminist human rights practitioner, originally from Argentina. She is Women's Rights and Gender Coordinator and Editor-in-Chief of the *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* at [FIAN International](#) in Heidelberg, Germany.

[FIAN International](#) is an international organization that has been advocating for the human right to food and nutrition for over 30 years. It supports grassroots communities and movements in their struggles against right to food violations.

*“Now more than ever, in tumultuous uncertain times, it is vital to strengthen our own movements and carry out a dialogue between different movements – with openness, understanding, empathy and respect.”*

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS |

Special thanks to Christina M. Schiavoni (independent researcher) for her support in developing the methodology for this article, and to her and to Giulio Iocco (University of Calabria and *Fuorimercato – Autogestione in Movimento*), Isabel Álvarez Vispo (URGENCI), Astrud Lea Beringer, Glory Lueong and Sabine Pabst (FIAN International) for their support in reviewing this article.

PHOTO | © Alisdare Hickson

Our food habits and diets are currently at the center of debates around climate change mitigation. Mainstream media increasingly focus on the impact of consumption of meat and other animal products on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.<sup>1</sup> The Special Report on Climate Change and Land by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)<sup>2</sup> includes a policy recommendation to reduce meat consumption, describing “healthy and sustainable [low meat] diets” as a major opportunity for “reducing GHG [greenhouse gas] emissions from food systems and improving health outcomes”.<sup>3</sup> One of its authors claims: [w]e don’t want to tell people what to eat [...]. But it would indeed be beneficial, for both climate and human health, if people in many rich countries consumed less meat, and if politics would create appropriate incentives to that effect”.<sup>4</sup> This sparked headlines such as: “U.N.: Humans Need to Stop Eating Meat to Save the Planet”.<sup>5</sup>

Behind sensationalist headlines, however, lies a complex picture. Some years back, a popular documentary on the meat industry claimed that animal agriculture produced a striking 51% of global GHG emissions<sup>6</sup> – a figure since largely debunked. Current UN estimates are closer to 15%.<sup>7</sup> Any global figures of this nature vary according to the methodologies applied, and are bound to obscure important context-specific differences, such as production models. Nevertheless, there is mounting consensus that intensive industrial meat and dairy production are comparatively resource-intensive.

Beyond scientific debates, there is also growing public interest in how the food we eat impacts climate change. In some parts of the world, more people are embracing

<sup>1</sup> Please see: Carrington, Damian. “Huge reduction in meat-eating ‘essential’ to avoid climate breakdown.” *The Guardian*, October 10, 2018. Available at: [www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/10/huge-reduction-in-meat-eating-essential-to-avoid-climate-breakdown](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/10/huge-reduction-in-meat-eating-essential-to-avoid-climate-breakdown).

<sup>2</sup> For more information on this report, please see article “Land, Climate, and the Construction of Scientific Knowledge: An Insider’s View of the IPCC Report on Climate Change and Land” in this issue of the *Watch*.

vegan diets, often for environmental reasons.<sup>8</sup> This seems to be especially the case in urban areas in the Global North, where the vegan and climate movements are becoming increasingly intertwined. For instance, various Fridays for Future (FFF) activists throughout Europe are vegan. In contrast, in rural areas of the Global North and more generally in the Global South, veganism is not a widespread trend, except for among a small proportion of the middle and upper classes.

In this issue of the *Watch*, we take a critical look at the issue of veganism, in the context of the right to food and nutrition and the environment. We ask: What is attracting more and more people to vegan diets – is it the climate crisis? Can veganism be a key solution for addressing climate change? Where are the intersections among the food sovereignty, climate and vegan movements? Is veganism at odds with the struggle for food sovereignty, or in synergy with it? To tackle these questions, we invite five activists to share their perspectives with us. Here they are presented in dialogue with one another.

Vanessa Álvarez González, an eco-feminist, anti-speciesist and vegan activist from Spain, works as communications and press officer at the energy cooperative *La Corriente*. Vanessa participates in various collectives, including *Ecologistas en Acción* and the *Red Ecofeminista*. Maresa Bossano has worked in the community food sector for 15 years in the UK, where she has managed the *Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Network UK*, and run an organic vegan café, as well as coordinated a national food cooperatives project, and a ‘Five a Day’ program. Line Niedeggen, a climate activist, organizes climate strikes with *Fridays for Future* in Heidelberg, Germany. Line is currently studying a Master’s degree in physics at Heidelberg University, specializing in environmental physics. C. Sathyamala (Sathya), from India, is a public health physician and academic researcher at the *International Institute of Social Studies (ISS)* in The Netherlands. Straddling between scholarship and activism, Sathya is part of the health and women’s movement in India. She holds a Master’s Degree in epidemiology and a doctorate in social sciences. Last but not least, Marité Álvarez is a traditional pastoralist from Northern Argentina. She is a member of *Pastor América*, a member organization of the *World Alliance of Indigenous and Mobile Peoples (WAMIP)*, and coordinates the Working Group on Sustainable Agricultural Development of the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples’ Mechanism (CSM) for relations with the Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

### WHAT IS VEGANISM AND WHAT MOTIVATES VEGANS?

Over the past years, veganism is increasingly in the spotlight. It sparks a lot of emotions, and there are myriad misconceptions. So what is veganism, and why do people become vegan? Vanessa says that veganism is “a movement, an ethical and political position that defends that we cannot continue using non-human animals – be it for food, clothing, transportation or medicine”. Her motivation to become vegan was initially empathy for both human and non-human animals, which she felt from an early age. Additionally, she believes in sovereignty, justice and respect towards our home planet and the beings that inhabit it. To her mind, veganism is tremendously radical, pushing for collective solutions against capitalism, including de-growth.

Maresa became vegetarian aged 16 because she believed it was wrong to kill animals to eat, and then turned vegan after finding out how milk and eggs are produced. She had always been interested in food and cooking, and was inspired as a child by her aunt, who was a talented cook and grew her own veggies. For Line, who grew up on an organic farm in Germany, what drives her to being vegan is “living the most

- 3 Shukla, P.R. *et al.*, eds. “Technical Summary” in IPCC. Climate Change and Land: an IPCC special report on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security, and greenhouse gas fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems. 2019. Available at: [www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/4/2019/11/03\\_Technical-Summary-TS.pdf](http://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/4/2019/11/03_Technical-Summary-TS.pdf).
- 4 Schiermeier, Quirin. “Eat less meat: UN climate-change report calls for change to human diet”. *Nature*, August 8, 2019. Available at: [www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02409-7](http://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02409-7).
- 5 Latza Nadeau, Barbie. “U.N.: Humans Need to Stop Eating Meat to Save the Planet”. *The Daily Beast*, August 8, 2019. Available at: [www.thedailybeast.com/un-stop-eating-meat-to-save-the-planet](http://www.thedailybeast.com/un-stop-eating-meat-to-save-the-planet).
- 6 Hancox, Dan. “The unstoppable rise of veganism: how a fringe movement went mainstream”. *The Guardian*, April 1, 2018. Available at: [www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/apr/01/vegans-are-coming-millennials-health-climate-change-animal-welfare](http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/apr/01/vegans-are-coming-millennials-health-climate-change-animal-welfare).
- 7 FAO. “Key facts and findings”. Available at: [www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/197623/icode/](http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/197623/icode/).
- 8 Hancox. *Supra* note 6.

climate-friendly way possible” – in other words, cutting emissions. This is also the motivation of many vegan or vegetarian Fridays for Future activists in her circle. She recognized that there is a lot of suffering on many farms around the world. She understands that labeling oneself is risky and difficult, as you are “judged and have to break from the ‘normal’ in a place like Germany where some people see eating meat as a religion or cultural belief”. Nonetheless, she believes it is necessary, if veganism is to become culturally accepted. Vanessa adds that, in times of uncertainty, some people actually want to forge an identity. Especially among the youth, being part of a social group – to have a sense of ‘belonging’ – may make them turn to veganism.

The relationship between veganism and feminism is a heated debate in some circles. According to Vanessa, veganism is largely a women’s movement.<sup>9</sup> In her view, this is related to our upbringing, empathy and care towards others. She also emphasizes the empowering dimensions of veganism, and how veganism and feminism intersect through an ecofeminist lens. She herself moved from environmentalism, through feminism, to eco-feminism, and believes that “if you as a woman become aware of the oppressions that you suffered because of your gender and turn to feminism, you can more easily develop empathy for animals”. And just as occurred with feminism, Vanessa notes that there is a tendency for veganism to be ‘perverted’ and ‘demonized’ by the system.

<sup>9</sup> According to various studies, the proportion of female vegans and vegetarians seems to be significantly higher across different parts of the world. In the US, for instance, a survey of 11,000 vegan people showed that 76% were women. Similar trends were found in Australia and Sweden. Please see: Gorvett, Zaria. “The mystery of why there are more women vegans”. *BBC Future*, February 18, 2020. Available at: [www.bbc.com/future/article/20200214-the-mystery-of-why-there-are-more-women-vegans](http://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200214-the-mystery-of-why-there-are-more-women-vegans).

Maresa equally mentions that, although this is changing (for instance with some male vegan body-builders), meat has been classically/stereotypically associated with manliness: “to be a strong, fit, healthy man, you must eat meat!” What’s more, some young women don’t eat animal products due to body image and health concerns, or because they think it will make them slimmer or more attractive, like some famous people and bloggers who eat plant based diets, she says.

In this context, a distinction is drawn between plant-based diets and veganism. The former refers only to diet and involves eating *primarily* plant-based foods (though this may still include some animal foods); the motivation behind adopting such diets is often mainly related to health. On the other hand, as described above, veganism is seen by many as a deeper philosophy and ethical position. These different perspectives and motivations help to explain why some who avoid animal products might consider more carefully, for example, where the food they eat comes from and how it is produced, while others might be content with eating ultra-processed meat alternatives or avocados from far away, as further explored below.

### **PRODUCTION MODELS MATTER – SO DO CLASS AND CULTURE**

Line emphasizes that the problem lies in the size of industrial agriculture and livestock keeping, not in animal production per se, and that “we need both – we need more people to be vegan, and more people to be sustainable with livestock, and this is both very possible”. There is mainly a need for people to reduce their meat and dairy consumption in the Global North, where it is exorbitantly high. Line adds that “if everyone would eat 50% less meat, it would be equal to 50% of people turning vegetarian”. More importantly, according to Line, “it isn’t about everyone becoming vegan but about changing to systems that are more sustainable”.

Sathya highlights that aggregate numbers on emissions do not capture important differences between small-scale and industrial animal agriculture. She therefore questions blanket statements that meat consumption is one of the main causes for emissions, at least in some parts of the world, and the disproportionate weight

some are seemingly placing on this, as compared to, for instance, the fossil fuel industry and other corporate sectors. In India, she argues, farms are mostly small-scale and may have an animal or two – and are therefore not major contributors at an individual level to climate change. She asks: Can survival emissions be equated with luxury emissions?<sup>10</sup> What purposes is veganism serving at an international level in the overall discourse?

In the conversation at hand, our three vegan guests all emphasize that they don't expect *everyone everywhere* to become vegan – and that this may not be necessary or possible for some people in some regions in the world. They don't actually see themselves as vegan activists or as part of a vegan movement as such, and they don't proactively place veganism at the center of their activism. Their living environments are also diverse. Line recognizes that in her activist circle in Heidelberg many are vegan or vegetarian, including many FFF activists who made the switch after joining. Vanessa and Maresa, on the other hand, live in villages where there aren't many other vegans.

Associating veganism with 'elitism' is not uncommon, as emphasized by Sathya. She points out that in India, for instance, vegetarianism is practiced by a dominant group, yet, to her knowledge, veganism is not, as many depend on eggs and milk, and yoghurt is central to the diets of most vegetarians. Also, in the Global North, those who identify as vegans are often largely based in urban areas and middle-class. Indeed, as Maresa admits, those struggling to afford food for themselves and their families may not have a choice, as they may lack access to different products and shops. The crux of the matter, for Sathya, is that to be able to eat "healthily" as a vegan, you need to be able to "afford an expensive diet, which is not an option for the poor". The intersection between veganism and healthy diets goes beyond the scope of this piece.

On the affordability of vegan diets, Vanessa asks a counter-question: How is it possible that some people – including those in "the South of the North" – cannot afford to access local, healthy, seasonal food, such as pulses and vegetables?" She further asserts: "At the end of the day, what is portrayed as an elitist thing pertaining to a white, highly educated minority, is another trap of the system, and hides the fact that poor people do not have access to quality food". In our system, the only affordable option for many people is fast food and soft drinks.

Finally, Sathya brings up cultural dimensions of food and diets and shares some paradoxes from India, marked by the caste system. Her research shows that some groups and individuals who profess not being violent against animals are oppressing humans in the name of vegetarianism. What is more, cases of extremism in certain upper-caste Hindu groups have been observed in which those who do not consume meat are "killing humans who transgress their food taboos". In this case, the basis of non-violence as a philosophy behind non-animal diets is transgressed, exposing the system's hypocrisies. The "food hierarchy in India mimics the caste hierarchy – one of the most violent you can think of", she says.<sup>11</sup> In this context, even though she is not a habitual meat eater and did not grow up eating beef or pork in her family, she chooses to eat meat every now and then for nutrition, but mostly for political reasons. She views this as offering resistance and supporting those who are oppressed by dietary fundamentalism.

<sup>10</sup> Please see: Narain *et al.* *Climate change: perspectives from India*. UNDP, November 2009. Available at: [www.undp.org/content/dam/india/docs/undp\\_climate\\_change.pdf](http://www.undp.org/content/dam/india/docs/undp_climate_change.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> For more information on this issue, please see Sathya's article: C Sathyamala. "Meat-eating in India: Whose food, whose politics, and whose rights?". *Policy Futures in Education* 17:7 (2019): 878–891. Available at: [journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1478210318780553](http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1478210318780553).

## ANIMAL-BASED AGRICULTURE AND CLIMATE JUSTICE: CAN WE OVERCOME THE BINARY?

In this exchange of ideas, opinions varied on whether livestock should have a place in agriculture, and whether meat and dairy production can be environmentally sustainable and respectful to animals. Vanessa believes that it is mostly not possible to keep animals sustainably due to the dominant system, which serves much of the population and requires large extensions of land to produce livestock. Also, from an ethical point of view, she believes we should steer away from an anthropocentric view of nature and refrain from using animals altogether, with the exception of certain contexts, such as in the case of Indigenous Peoples. Similarly, Maresa deems that apart from a few exceptions, such as hunter-gatherer societies, most of the world cannot produce animal products and still live in tune with nature. There is some leeway for using animals in farms, but not for food. According to Line, as mentioned above, livestock can be kept sustainably, and more people should engage with this alternative.

Sathya shares examples from her experience in villages in India, where the way animals are kept and treated is often very different to the West. In one village case study, animals such as cows and buffaloes are used for milk and goats for meat, and farmers' lives are entwined with their animals. During her fieldwork, one woman spoke about becoming 'depressed' because her cow died due to a snakebite. With a specific philosophy and ideology, she says, it is possible to keep animals in a respectful and sustainable way. And this is largely the case with widespread small-scale farms in India, with a few exceptions in the last few decades, such as the transformation of what was a backyard activity into large-scale poultry industry.

Marité, a livestock herder, shares her experience on the importance of animal-based agriculture. Pastoralism isn't merely a way of production, but a *way of life* for her community and her family in the South American Gran Chaco, a region that covers Argentina, Paraguay and Bolivia. Like their ancestors, they keep goats, cows and pigs, and have also recently started bee-keeping. They practice transhumance and adapt to the environment without changing it, she feels. Each territory has its own biodiversity, and as pastoralists, they move with the seasons as small family units. Some pastoralists also live off of fishing in some seasons, and many grow vegetables. Their eating habits change throughout the year, according to the territorial availability of different animals, fish and vegetables, based on traditional practices. "Our food sovereignty is provided by Chaco's '*monte*' (the grasslands) and rivers", Marité states. She adds: "What I cook starts with the territory and ends on my plate. Food is life. It is the starting point."

She and her fellow pastoralists see themselves as part of the landscape, and they move to allow it to replenish and regenerate. For them, keeping livestock means not invading or harming others or nature. Marité's organization defends food sovereignty, territory, land and water, and their way of production, so by default, they also defend climate justice. The way they see it, food sovereignty and climate justice are inextricably linked, so it is vital to avoid the blanket assumption that livestock keeping is a major contributor to climate change.<sup>12</sup> "We must put people, human rights and food sovereignty at the center, and the rest will follow", Marité affirms. She adds: "Climate justice has been in my veins since I was in my mother's belly. It was the same for my mother in her mother's belly. And for my grandmother. And my great-grandmother. It is part of who we are".

<sup>12</sup> For more information on a pastoralist perspective on measuring environmental impacts of livestock system, please see: Manzano, Pablo. "Niveles de referencia en sistemas ganaderos: claves para identificar impactos". *Remedia Network Blog*, October 17, 2019. Available in Spanish at: [redremedia.wordpress.com/2019/10/17/niveles-de-referencia-en-sistemas-ganaderos-claves-para-identificar-impactos/](https://redremedia.wordpress.com/2019/10/17/niveles-de-referencia-en-sistemas-ganaderos-claves-para-identificar-impactos/).

With the arrival of intensive livestock keepers, however, their territories are being reduced. Many traditional livestock keepers are selling their lands (or rather, the right to occupancy, as they do not have formal land titles) at low prices because they have been persuaded that nomadic pastoralism is ‘backwards’. As droughts and floods increase, some see no other option as they struggle to cope with the impacts of climate change. What’s more, women tend to suffer the most in wet weather due to the harm it causes to the animals they keep (goats). Climate justice and food sovereignty are linked, Marité asserts: “If my environment is destroyed, I am deprived of my food sovereignty and of my food system”. Indeed, for those who grew up with livestock keeping, it is the only thing they know; it provides them “with dignity, food and a roof over their heads”. Families who lose their traditional livelihood often end up living in poverty in urban areas and become dependent on government programs.

Sathya also emphasizes the critical question of livelihoods. In India, for example, the fisherfolk population encompasses 4 million people, over 860,000 families.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, for groups such as traditional livestock keepers, fisherfolk or pastoralists, their livelihoods depend on having access to grazing land, rivers, lakes, oceans and natural resources. They need these to produce food and generate an income to feed themselves and their families.

We must also remember, as Marité insists, that small-scale producers have a spiritual connection to nature, individually and collectively. Before they enter the territory, they have an inner dialogue and ask for permission. The *‘monte’* is also a living entity, a being, just as she herself is life. Each part of the whole is equally life. In this respect, meat and lettuce are of equal value. Marité cannot conceive of the landscape and agriculture as two separate entities, nor of having to choose whether to herd cows or to grow lettuce – integrating livestock and agriculture is thus essential. In her worldview and context, it is hard to grasp how vegans relate to food, and where their food comes from. In Marité’s cosmovision, farming with nature is after all a holistic approach to food production.

### **THE REAL DRIVER OF CLIMATE CHANGE**

Our world faces not just climate change, but also environmental destruction, including the loss of biodiversity, soil erosion, pollution, and water scarcity. Despite the sometimes diverging and nuanced perspectives of the activists in this conversation, they all point to the underlying cause: a perverse system.

Vanessa and Line quote the slogan of the Fridays for Future movement: “System Change, not Climate Change” and emphasize the urgent need to get out of the capitalist system, a main feature of which is consumerism. In the North, as Line says, we consume “too many fossil fuels, too many animal products, going on vacations too often, buying too many clothes”. Marité adds that also in countries like Argentina, especially in cities and urban areas, people do not have time to think about, for instance, where their food comes from. We must “consume, consume, consume, non-stop”. Societies create a comfort zone where we become attached to our little routines: “work, go out, go shopping, and copy-paste.” It is hard to get out of the “orbit of our well-oiled lives”.

Agribusiness and corporate power are also dominant in our current system. Marité denounces that power and resources are increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few. Even though there is divergence on the role of livestock in agriculture among

<sup>13</sup> International Collective in Support of Fisheries. “Fisheries and Fishing Communities in India”. Available at: [indianfisheries.icsf.net/](http://indianfisheries.icsf.net/).

the vegan and non-vegan interviewees, there is a common critique of agribusiness, including industrial agriculture largely reliant on monoculture and agrochemicals. Vanessa points out how problematic it is that smallholders are disappearing, to pave the way for large-scale crops such as palm oil, avocado, soy, beetroot and other crops. Marité, in a similar vein of thought, condemns intensive livestock production, where some farmers own up to 3,000 cows, compared to the around 800 cows they own as an extended family of over 23 people. She argues that the “concentration of industry has a harmful effect on society”, leading to a situation that compares to slavery; agribusiness fails to feed the world: it has merely “created a new ‘caste’”. In her eyes, the real struggle is against the neoliberal model that promotes capital accumulation.

Unfortunately, as Vanessa points out, agribusiness worldwide is propped up by public policies. In Europe, subsidies for agriculture and livestock production under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) fail to target those families who work the land, and go instead to the sugar industry, big supermarkets, corporations and even construction companies.<sup>14</sup> Under the auspices of ‘generating jobs’, subsidies end up in the wrong hands. Conversely, small agroecological producers must go to great lengths to certify their products as organic. “Why do *they* have to do that, and not the other way around?”, she asks.

<sup>14</sup> Please see: Jarreta, Daniel. “Política Agraria Común (PAC) Tejerina planea evitar que las constructoras sigan recibiendo subvenciones agrícolas”. *El Confidencial*, December 22, 2014. Available in Spanish at: [www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2014-12-22/tejerina-planea-impedir-que-las-pro-motoras-reciban-subvenciones-agricolas\\_590146/](http://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2014-12-22/tejerina-planea-impedir-que-las-pro-motoras-reciban-subvenciones-agricolas_590146/).

Another critical aspect brought up in this dialogue is globalization. As Sathya points out, in our problematic system of production, pigs in China are fed with soy from Brazil, and then Chinese pork is exported throughout the world. The problem is structural.

In Argentina, as Marité describes, food aid is composed of ultra-processed food – powdered milk, pasta, sugar, canned tomatoes with preservatives. The agribusiness promoted in our capitalist system, which causes ecological destruction, negatively impacts our diets, nutrition and health. In other words, it is making both humans and our planet sick. Under the influence of industry, people are forgetting what real nutrition means: children can’t differentiate the value of a grape vs. a “Cheeto”<sup>15</sup>, she stresses. Vanessa also mentions childhood obesity as a growing issue in Spain, caused by lack of access to both healthy food and education on food and nutrition.

<sup>15</sup> Ultra-processed cheese-flavored puffs. Marité referred to a “Chizito”, the former name of this brand in Argentina.

Various interviewees equally highlighted the oppression of women by the dominant system. Peasant women’s work is largely rendered invisible, even though they fulfill a big portion of both productive work in the farms *and* care work – in their homes, communities and movements.<sup>16</sup> There is a strong connection between climate justice, sustainable farming and feminism, Line adds. Women are more vulnerable to climate change impacts. She suggests that “you don’t have to be vegan to be a feminist, but you have to empower women everywhere and stand up for them, and improve their education on sustainable land use”.

<sup>16</sup> For more information, please see: Andrews, Donna, Smith, Kiah and Morena, M. Alejandra. “Enraged: Women and Nature”. *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch*, 2019. Available at: [www.right-to-food-and-nutrition.org/files/rtfn-watch11-2019\\_eng-6-15.pdf](http://www.right-to-food-and-nutrition.org/files/rtfn-watch11-2019_eng-6-15.pdf).

Furthermore, they all underscore that the food system mistreats both animals and humans alike: Vanessa and Marité denounce the extremely poor working conditions of workers in slaughterhouses, which for example in Spain are often migrant workers with few other options. Indeed, those who work throughout the food chain face various forms of structural violence. Sathya reminds us, for instance, that farmer suicide rates in India are alarmingly high. These are all victims of our perverse system.



## CHALLENGING FALSE SOLUTIONS

In this age of crises – interviewees concur – many misleading false solutions are proffered. While the vegan participants identified their diets as their main contribution to combatting climate change, due to lower greenhouse gas emissions, they all recognized that this simply doesn't fit the bill. Line puts it clearly: “some people may become vegan to do their part in helping the change we need, yet it is difficult when they do and think this is enough; the main thing is not to be silent and vegan, but to raise our voices”.

Vanessa also explains that eating a plant-based diet in Europe defeats the purpose if this means eating avocados from Mexico or quinoa from Peru or Bolivia, or consuming meat alternatives that are ultra-processed foods, wrapped in plastic, and produced by major corporations like Unilever. We must look at how all products are produced, including non-animal-based ones, Maresa notes. Some of those who eat plant-based diets do not see the difference between small-scale and large-scale, monoculture-based farming, she says – yet this is a crucial distinction to make. For instance, palm oil, used in vegan burgers and other vegan products, destroys rainforests.

Generally, Vanessa contends, solutions are not merely based on changing our individual patterns of consumption, by exchanging X product with Y product. The same goes for swapping plastic bags with cloth bags, or plastic cutlery with corn-based cutlery. This is a form of ‘greenwashing’, and another ‘trap’ of a system that promotes individualism. Sathya agrees, and cautions against an uncritical promotion of veganism, which could act as a façade as well as deflect from the larger causes. While individual change is of course necessary, it simply is not enough.

In a 2018 report, the World Economic Forum acknowledged that the industrial food system has failed, yet proposed new technologies as a solution, including “alternative proteins”.<sup>17</sup> Since veganism is growing, at least in the Global North, big investors are moving quickly to invest in meat-free or plant-based ventures, such as alternative meats.<sup>18</sup> Among the many issues this raises, lab-produced food is energy-intensive, as underscored by Sathya.

On that note, Sathya also warns of a push to separate food production from the land.<sup>19</sup> In some countries such as UK, USA (and India is also following suit)<sup>20</sup> they are already growing with hydroponics. Most notably, the biotechnology industry is moving fast. One of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's fourteen “Grand Challenges in Global Health” was to grow a “single staple plant species”, one plant that would have protein, carbs, and everything needed for human nutrition.<sup>21</sup> Even if this project didn't kick off, we must not lose sight of such developments, which largely add to the challenge of how we produce food. If food is no longer grown on soil, then the entire food system can be (even) more easily controlled and it will bring about cataclysmic changes in relation to land. She maintains that we should not move into so-called alternatives without seeing the big picture, and seeking holistic options. In view of this widespread ‘techno-optimism’, Vanessa also cautions: the solution cannot come “from those who are pushing us into the abyss”. Many technological advances benefit only a few – yet the answer must be collective and fair for everyone.

17 For more information, please see: Filardi, Marcos Ezequiel, and Prato, Stefano. “Reclaiming the Future of Food Challenging the Dematerialization of Food Systems”. *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch*, 2018. Available at: [www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/files/1\\_eng\\_reclaiming\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_food\\_challenging.pdf](http://www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/files/1_eng_reclaiming_the_future_of_food_challenging.pdf).

18 Hancox. *Supra* note 6.

19 For an analysis of the impact of digitalization and dematerialization of food on the right to food and nutrition, please see: *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* 2018, “When Food Becomes Immaterial Confronting the Digital Age”. Available at: [www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/files/rtfn-watch-2018\\_eng.pdf](http://www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/files/rtfn-watch-2018_eng.pdf).

20 For more information, please visit: [hydroponicsspace.com/top-7-countries-that-use-hydroponics-their-production-size-revealed/](http://hydroponicsspace.com/top-7-countries-that-use-hydroponics-their-production-size-revealed/).

21 Please see point 9 under goal 7 “Improve nutrition to promote health” in Gates Foundation. “Fourteen Grand Challenges in Global Health Announced in \$200 Million Initiative”. October 14, 2003. Available at: [www.gatesfoundation.org/Media-Center/Press-Releases/2003/10/14-Grand-Challenges-in-Global-Health](http://www.gatesfoundation.org/Media-Center/Press-Releases/2003/10/14-Grand-Challenges-in-Global-Health).

## CONVERGING AROUND SYSTEM CHANGE

Despite the difference in contexts, worldviews and backgrounds of our interviewees there is consensus on one thing: we must transform the inequitable, capitalist, and patriarchal system to face the current climate and ecological crises, and other ongoing multiple crises, and achieve nutritious, affordable food for all. And to do so, we must be clear in our analysis, and go to the root of the problem. Second, we must be clear in our collective visions.

Here are some elements of what a different system could look like. Fundamentally, people must be able to decide what food they produce and how. All five respondents partaking in this rich debate converge around the importance of food being produced by small-scale producers in an agroecological manner, along with the promotion of local and regional markets to keep transportation chains short. This is key to achieving climate justice, considering that industrial large-scale agriculture is a major polluter – be it industrial agriculture or livestock. Agroecology is the way forward to cool down the planet.

To achieve these common goals, we must apply multiple strategies. We must demand that governments adopt policies to support small-scale producers so that nutritious food is accessible for all – and not just the elite – and apply necessary regulations, for instance on pesticides. We must stop the concentration and grabbing of land and natural resources by a few and the pushing of megaprojects at the expense of food sovereignty, nature and biodiversity. We must fight corporate power, and the power imbalances *and* the greenhouse emissions it creates.

To make these demands, we must use our voice – especially in democracies where we have a chance to do so. We must do so on the streets, as the FFF movement is doing, and through our votes, Line urges. We must make sure that politicians do not get reelected if they do not use their power in the right way, in line with our goals. Marité calls for affected people's real participation in decisions that impact their lives – and highlights that states must implement the manifold global instruments that support civil society in their struggles.

We must undoubtedly work as a collective – our guest activists already emphasized above that individuals alone cannot achieve much. Yet it is still important to educate society, and to question our behavior, regarding for instance the impacts of the Global North's consumerism on other parts of the world. Generally, we as consumers all over the world can start questioning where our food comes from, and we can choose to support small-scale, sustainable producers.

The current youth climate movement, of which veganism is a popular component, has achieved a great deal of attention, and it's worth noting that the longer-established food sovereignty movement has not been able to achieve this unprecedented level of publicity. But even though they may come from new and different realities, they are building on the work done before them. Now more than ever, in tumultuous uncertain times, it is vital to strengthen our own movements and engage in dialogue between different movements – with openness, understanding, empathy and respect. We must find the nuances in complex issues that can too often be presented in simplistic and polarizing ways, as this will not bring us any closer to change. Only by having these difficult conversations and trying to find common ground can we effectively move forward. Otherwise, we might fall into various types of 'fundamentalisms', criticized by all in this five-way dialogue.

We do not need to join in all aspects of all struggles, agree on everything or ‘colonize’ other spaces. Ultimately, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Each corner of the world has its own context-specific vision of food sovereignty, Marité argues. Line echoes her on climate justice:

*We should not make this debate about whether veganism is the perfect thing or eating meat is. We will never agree on a climate-masterplan – there is no one single solution. Instead, we need to find joint solutions for the common challenges we face, yet these must be localized solutions for local communities in different countries to be able to become more sustainable, make the circle smaller and not depend on big players anymore. The bandwidth of motivations, beliefs and ideas is what we need to make sure everyone can be part of this transformation. People and countries are different – and all must be seen and have their say.*

This article is just one example of how activists and practitioners from around the world can engage in a rich and meaningful conversation: our five interviewees look forward to further discussions and debates for a common struggle for climate justice and food sovereignty.



#### **IN BRIEF**

Our diets are currently at the center of debates around climate change mitigation. Mainstream media increasingly focus on the impact of meat consumption on CO2 emissions. Beyond scientific debates, there is growing public interest in how the food we eat impacts climate change. In some parts of the world, more people are embracing vegan diets, and the vegan and climate movements are becoming increasingly intertwined. For instance, various Fridays for Future activists throughout Europe are vegan.

In this article, we take a critical look at veganism. What is attracting more and more people to vegan diets – is it the climate crisis? Can veganism be a key solution for addressing climate change? Where are the intersections among the food sovereignty, climate and vegan movements? Is veganism at odds with the struggle for food sovereignty, or in synergy with it? To tackle these questions, five activists shared their perspectives with us.



#### **KEY CONCEPTS**

→ Veganism may be described as “a movement, an ethical and political position that defends that we cannot continue using non-human animals – be it for food, clothing, transportation or medicine”. Several motivations drive people to endorse veganism, including empathy for animals and environmental reasons.

- There are different positions among interviewees on whether livestock should have a place in agriculture, and whether meat production can be environmentally sustainable.
- Yet it is argued that the debate should not be about whether “veganism is the perfect thing or eating meat is”, as there is “no one single solution that fits all”.
- Instead, we need to strengthen our own movements and engage in dialogue with others, joining forces for the common goal: transforming the capitalist patriarchal system to face the current crises and achieve food sovereignty and climate justice.
- For this, we must raise our voices and demand that governments adopt policies that curb climate-damaging agribusiness and support small-scale producers to produce nutritious, affordable food for all – in an agroecological manner that cools down the planet.



#### **KEY WORDS**

- Veganism
- Climate change
- Ecological destruction
- Climate justice
- Food sovereignty
- Models of production
- Agroecology
- Agribusiness
- Corporate power
- Capitalism
- Patriarchy

