

TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE LIVESTOCK: THE CENTRAL ROLE OF ANIMALS IN THE FOOD SYSTEMS OF THE FUTURE



When it comes to sustainability, **livestock farming** is often at the centre of heated debates. On the one hand, it is criticised for consuming excessive amounts of natural resources and emitting greenhouse gases; on the other, it represents **an irreplaceable source of food, income, and culture**.

The recently launched “**Common Principles and Actions for Sustainable Livestock Production**” sets out a shared

agenda for sustainability, emphasising **the need to deliver benefits across the environment, farmer livelihoods, and food security, while placing farmers at the centre of discussions**. It was developed and endorsed by 10 international organisations that collectively represent much of the global livestock value chain, spanning the beef, dairy, egg, farmer, feed, animal health, meat, poultry, rendering, and wool sectors, and provides **a foundation for collaboration with governments, institutions, and partners to accelerate the transformation toward sustainable livestock**.

The principles outlined offer a balanced perspective, emphasising that **sustainability does not mean “fewer animals at all costs”** by indiscriminately reducing production, **but rather “better-raised animals,”** thanks to innovations that lower environmental impact while strengthening the sector’s social and economic role.

Three-Dimensional Sustainability: Why Animals Remain Indispensable

The text emphasises a key idea: sustainability is about balancing the environment, the economy, and society. **Cutting emissions alone is not enough if, at the same time, millions of people are left without food** or if farmers cannot make a living. Instead, true “triple win” solutions must simultaneously reduce the ecological footprint, ensure nutritious and affordable food, and support the livelihoods of those who work with animals.

Today, **1.3 billion people worldwide rely on livestock**, accounting for approximately 40% of global agricultural GDP. Meat, milk, and eggs provide 34% of the world’s protein and essential micronutrients such as vitamin B12, iron, and zinc, which are often lacking, especially in children and vulnerable populations. **Animal-sourced foods provide high-quality protein and vital nutrients that help combat malnutrition**, supporting better growth, cognitive development, and academic performance in children.

Animals also play a circular role: **86% of livestock feed comes from materials inedible to humans**, such as grass and agricultural residues, **and 30% from food by-products that would otherwise end up in landfills**. These resources are transformed into food for people and return fertility to soils through manure. In addition, they supply co-products that are valuable to other sectors, such as hides, wool, and fats for energy or feed.

Healthy Animals, Healthier Planet

One of the strongest messages concerns **animal health**. Animals that grow well are more productive, use fewer resources, and produce less pollution. **Preventing disease, investing in vaccination, and ensuring early diagnosis are all crucial steps to lowering emissions while strengthening food security**. Yet today, only **a tiny fraction of global climate funds — just 0.01 to 0.02% — is allocated to animal health**, a striking contradiction given its enormous impact on both climate and food systems. The document calls for reversing this trend, emphasising that healthy animals lead to higher productivity and lower emissions per unit of food produced.

The livestock sector of the future will rely on genetics, precision nutrition, digital technologies, innovative feed formulations, and animal welfare practices. In many regions of the world, these advances already allow more food to be produced using less land and generating fewer emissions than in the past. The real challenge lies in making these innovations accessible to small-scale farmers and **promoting collaborative knowledge sharing**.

Innovation and Shared Knowledge: Farmers at the Centre

The principles clearly state that **there is no single model for sustainable livestock farming**. A small herder in Africa, a dairy farm in Europe, or a large cattle operation in South America face **very different challenges and opportunities**. The path forward must be built locally, guided by flexible policies that set common goals while allowing for tailored solutions. **Sustainable approaches need to respect cultural, economic, and geographic diversity**, recognising that each farming context is unique. **Policies should be outcome-oriented rather than prescriptive**, enabling solutions that fit local realities.

The document concludes with a simple yet crucial message: **Efforts to improve food systems must lead with a farmer-centric approach that recognises their role** as the primary stewards of land, livestock, and ecosystems, directly influencing sustainability, food security, and livelihoods. **Without farmers, sustainability cannot be achieved**. Policies and initiatives must be farmer-centric, acknowledging their skills, needs, and rights, and actively involving them in decision-making processes.

