



HAL
open science

Opinion paper: Livestock is at the heart of interacting levers to reduce feed-food competition in agroecological food systems

Pietro Barbieri, Bertrand Dumont, Marc Benoit, Thomas Nesme

► To cite this version:

Pietro Barbieri, Bertrand Dumont, Marc Benoit, Thomas Nesme. Opinion paper: Livestock is at the heart of interacting levers to reduce feed-food competition in agroecological food systems. *Animal*, 2022, 16 (2), pp.100436. 10.1016/j.animal.2021.100436 . hal-03534030

HAL Id: hal-03534030

<https://hal.inrae.fr/hal-03534030>

Submitted on 8 Jan 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

1 **Opinion paper: livestock is at the heart of interacting levers to reduce feed-food competition in agroecological**
2 **food systems**

3

4

5

6

7 Pietro Barbieri^{a,b}, Bertrand Dumont^c, Marc Benoit^c, Thomas Nesme^{a,b}

8

9 *^a Bordeaux Sciences Agro, Univ. Bordeaux, UMR 1391 ISPA, CS 40201, 33175 Gradignan Cedex, France*

10 *^b INRAE, UMR 1391 ISPA, CS 20032, 33882 Villenave d'Ornon, France*

11 *^c Université Clermont Auvergne, INRAE, VetAgro Sup, UMR 1213 Herbivores, Theix, 63122 Saint-Genès-Champanelle, France*

12

13 Corresponding Author: Pietro Barbieri, pietro.barbieri@agro-bordeaux.fr, Bordeaux Sciences Agro, Univ. Bordeaux, UMR
14 1391 ISPA, CS 40201, 33175 Gradignan Cedex, France.

15

16

17

18

19 **Keywords:** agroecology, trade-offs, synergies, feed use efficiency, sustainability

20

21

22 **Introduction**

23 The future of the livestock sector is critical due to its significant contributions to global warming, water and air
24 pollution, biodiversity loss, as well as ethical considerations on animal welfare. Beyond the evidence that a decrease
25 in livestock production can limit its environmental footprint, livestock also plays a positive role in most
26 agroecosystems and in feeding the world population. Along with the production of meat and milk, pasture-based
27 systems provide a number of ecosystem services. Livestock help closing nutrient cycles at the farm and landscape
28 level and can support crop productivity through the provision of manure in crop-livestock areas. Livestock farming
29 generates crucial incomes at household level in developing countries and animal products provide essential amino
30 acids and micronutrients such as vitamin B12, vitamin D, iodine, calcium, iron, and zinc. Overall, animal products
31 contribute to 18% of global calories and 25% of global protein consumption (Mottet et al., 2017). However, this
32 contribution, quite variable among world regions, requires using about one-third of world arable land for feed
33 production (Mottet et al., 2017). This generates feed vs. food competition for both the use of plant biomass and for
34 the use of agricultural land, in particular because livestock production entails large conversion losses.

35 Here, we show how several levers could unwind feed vs. food competition by (i) reducing total feed demand, (ii)
36 reducing food-competing feed demand, (iii) increasing food availability, (iv) increasing animal feed use efficiency,
37 and (v) increasing system efficiency through circular economy. We then discuss how the simultaneous adoption of
38 these levers may lead to synergies or antagonisms in the context of agroecological farming and conclude on
39 implications for better integration of livestock in sustainable food systems. The ideas presented in this article are
40 based on the results from an expert-based seminar as supported by literature evidence.

41 **Reducing total feed demand**

42 Feed vs. food competition could be reduced by decreasing total feed demand (Figure 1). Such reduction could be
43 achieved by decreasing the livestock population in line with a reduction in animal product consumption, especially
44 that exceeding nutritional recommendations in industrialised countries. Dietary shifts are widely reported as key for
45 transitioning towards more sustainable food systems and for reducing the use of food-competing feed by up to 72%
46 (Barbieri et al., 2021).

47 **Reducing food-competing feed demand**

48 A second direct lever would consist in reducing food-competing feed demand. This reduction could be achieved by
49 using new feed resources that are not edible by humans such as cover crops and grass from orchard and vineyard
50 inter-rows. Beyond the shade provided by trees to the animals, tree foliage may be a nutritive feed resource for
51 animal production, health and welfare as listed among the most important benefits of agroforestry (García de Jalón
52 et al., 2018). Introducing legume or grass-legume leys in cropping systems can jointly support the production of
53 high-quality animal proteins and increase farm nitrogen self-sufficiency. Valuing those non-human-edible forage
54 resources through ruminant production is a major avenue to reduce feed-food competition (Barbieri et al., 2021).

55 **Increasing food availability**

56 Increasing food availability is in itself a way to alleviate the feed vs. food competition. The most direct way to
57 increase food availability would consist in increasing the cropland area allocated to food production, although
58 converting grasslands or leys to cropland would in return reduce the ecosystem services provided by grasslands to
59 crops. However, such a lever could be avoided if (i) cropland productivity was increased by enhancing plant
60 nutrition through optimised crop rotations (e.g., by including leguminous catch crops, decreasing nutrient losses,
61 increasing nutrient use efficiency in cropping systems, and transferring fertility from grasslands to croplands through
62 ruminant manure (Barbieri et al., 2021)) and if (ii) technologies to extract energy and proteins from crops were
63 improved. It was calculated that the human-edible crop energy and protein could be improved by an average of 12%
64 and 21%, respectively, if appropriate technologies are applied to crop biomass (Laisse et al., 2019).

65 **Increasing animal feed use efficiency**

66 Increasing animal feed use efficiency is an important lever to save feed resources. Livestock breeding programmes
67 can help to improve individual animal performances in that perspective. Livestock transforms human-edible crop-
68 based energy and proteins into animal products in a rather inefficient way; for instance beef cattle consume 6-20 kg
69 of human-edible grains to produce 1 kg of edible animal-based food (Mottet et al., 2017). While genetic selection
70 initially aimed to maximise production criteria, a research priority is now the development of breeding programmes

71 for (i) enhancing the digestive capacity of individuals on roughages that are not in competition with human food
72 supply, (ii) improving their ability to deal with anti-nutritional factors that affect the digestion of legumes and
73 leguminous seeds, and (iii) selecting traits such as residual feed intake to reduce methane emissions. The
74 digestibility of non-edible biomass, especially of fodders, could be enhanced (i) by mixing crop species with
75 contrasted agronomic traits and feed value, or (ii) by simultaneously or alternately grazing herbivore species on the
76 same pastures. For instance, grazing sheep with cattle provided a ~29% gain in system productivity compared to
77 monospecific sheep grazing (d'Alexis et al., 2014). Opportunities for enhancing feed use efficiency therefore exist
78 both at the animal and herd levels.

79 **Increasing system efficiency through circular economy**

80 Finally, the feed vs. food competition can be mitigated by increasing farming and food system efficiency by
81 implementing circular economy principles. Any lever aiming at optimising harvesting and storage practices to limit
82 feed wastage would bring some benefits in term of feed supply. System efficiency could also be improved through
83 circular economy principles by harnessing the use of food wastes to feed monogastrics. This could decrease the land
84 requirement of European pork production by more than 20%, thereby saving land for the annual cereal consumption
85 of 70 million Europeans (zu Ermgassen et al., 2016) – although this would also require changing current EU
86 legislation on feed use. The use of insect-based products could represent an innovative source of feed for
87 monogastrics. Finally, territorial reorganisation would be a promising pathway by bringing animals closer to feed
88 resources. In this context, catch crop, cover crop and crop residues are key resources for ruminants, contributing to
89 close local nutrient cycles while avoiding excess of nutrients (N, P) in high livestock density areas. Similarly, off-
90 season crops could be valued, together or not with manure, as substrates for anaerobic digestion (for biogas
91 production), with possible benefits for cropland fertilisation by using high quality digestate.

92 **Interactions among leverage tools**

93 Many of the above-mentioned levers to attenuate the feed vs. food competition have already been detailed in several
94 studies. However, previous studies have missed the feedbacks that implementing those levers could have on
95 croplands. Accounting for those feedbacks is particularly important in a context of agroecological production where

96 many synergies between crop and livestock production are encouraged. Paying attention to the synergies or
97 antagonisms among levers is also key to design appropriate food system scenarios. Figure 1 summarizes possible
98 interactions and quantifies the relative contribution of each lever on crop-based food availability and crop
99 productivity. While most previously discussed levers would lead to an increase in crop-based food availability, they
100 can have contrasted effects on crop productivity. For instance, a decrease in livestock population would reduce high
101 quality and nutrient-concentrated organic-based fertilising resources such as farmyard manure (which accounts
102 nowadays for about 25% of all nitrogen applied to cropland soils according to the FAO) and decrease the
103 provisioning of high quality food (Barbieri et al., 2021). Grazing new feed resources such as intercrops or inter-
104 rows in orchards can also provide soluble and reactive nutrients that benefit tree growth and production, which is
105 an example of synergy. However, antagonisms may also exist: for instance increasing energy and protein crop
106 extraction through improved food technologies would also reduce the amount of industrial by-products that can be
107 used as animal feed.

108 **Conclusion**

109 What does this analysis imply for global food systems and scientific research? We believe that beyond the necessary
110 slight reduction in global livestock population (2), the implementation of combined levers could bring many benefits
111 for enhancing food production while improving agriculture sustainability. This is likely to deeply modify both
112 regional agricultural organisations and global economic flows of agricultural commodities. Revising national or
113 continental agricultural and food security policies is key to implement the different levers we reported here. Further
114 studies exploring local and global food system scenarios should quantitatively assess the effect of the different levers
115 presented here, and take into account their possible interactions. In these modelling studies, livestock is a key
116 component of agroecological food systems, and a number of options exist for optimising their role in sustainable
117 food systems.

118

119

120 **Ethics statement**

121 Not applicable.

122

123 **Data and model availability**

124 Not applicable.

125

126 **Author ORCIDs**

127 Barbieri Pietro: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3248-4487>

128 Dumont Bertrand: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8376-4417>

129 Benoit Marc: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6190-866X>

130 Nesme Thomas: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0695-9936>

131

132 **Authors Contributions**

133 All authors conceived the study, developed the analysis and contributed in writing and revising the manuscript.

134

135 **Declaration of interest**

136 There is no potential conflict of interest.

137

138 **Acknowledgements**

139 We are grateful to U. Gaudare and N. Malet for their contributions in the very first discussions that lead to the
140 further development of this manuscript.

141

142 **Financial support statement**

143 This research received no specific grant from any funding agency, commercial or not-for-profit section.

144

145 **References**







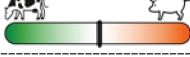


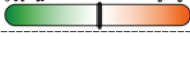

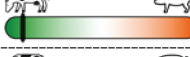

- 146 Barbieri, P., Pellerin, S., Seufert, V., Smith, L., Ramankutty, N., Nesme, T., 2021. Global option space for organic
147 agriculture is delimited by nitrogen availability. *Nature Food* 2, 363–372. [https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-](https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-021-00276-y)
148 021-00276-y
- 149 d’Alexis, S., Sauvant, D., Boval, M., 2014. Mixed grazing systems of sheep and cattle to improve liveweight gain:
150 a quantitative review. *The Journal of Agricultural Science* 152, 655–666.
151 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021859613000622>
- 152 García de Jalón, S., Burgess, P.J., Graves, A., Moreno, G., McAdam, J., Pottier, E., Novak, S., Bondesan, V.,
153 Mosquera-Losada, R., Crous-Durán, J., Palma, J.H.N., Paulo, J.A., Oliveira, T.S., Cirou, E., Hannachi, Y.,
154 Pantera, A., Wartelle, R., Kay, S., Malignier, N., Van Lerberghe, P., Tsonkova, P., Mirck, J., Rois, M.,
155 Kongsted, A.G., Thenail, C., Luske, B., Berg, S., Gosme, M., Vityi, A., 2018. How is agroforestry
156 perceived in Europe? An assessment of positive and negative aspects by stakeholders. *Agroforestry*
157 *Systems* 92, 829–848. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10457-017-0116-3>
- 158 Laisse, S., Baumont, R., Dusart, L., Gaudré, D., Rouillé, B., Benoit, M., Veysset, P., Rémond, D., Peyraud, J.-L.,
159 2019. L’efficience nette de conversion des aliments par les animaux d’élevage : une nouvelle approche
160 pour évaluer la contribution de l’élevage à l’alimentation humaine. *INRA Productions Animales* 31, 269–
161 288. <https://doi.org/10.20870/productions-animales.2018.31.3.2355>
- 162 Mottet, A., de Haan, C., Falcucci, A., Tempio, G., Opio, C., Gerber, P., 2017. Livestock: On our plates or eating at
163 our table? A new analysis of the feed/food debate. *Global Food Security* 14, 1–8.
164 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2017.01.001>
- 165 zu Ermgassen, E.K.H.J., Phalan, B., Green, R.E., Balmford, A., 2016. Reducing the land use of EU pork
166 production: where there’s swill, there’s a way. *Food Policy* 58, 35–48.
167 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2015.11.001>

169

170 **Figure caption**

171 **Figure 1** Levers to decrease feed vs. food competition and their possible feedbacks on cropland production. Levers were grouped
172 into five main categories. The signs and the colour of each cell indicate the relative contribution of each sub-lever on crop-based
173 food availability. A number of levers can also modify the balance between ruminants and monogastrics. This Figure is based on
174 the results from an expert-based seminar, as supported by literature evidence.

175

Levers to decrease feed vs. food competition		Systemic feedbacks and interactions			
		<i>Crop-based food availability</i>	<i>Crop productivity</i>	<i>Ruminant/monogastric balance</i>	<i>Synergies and antagonisms</i>
1. Reducing total feed demand by reducing the density of livestock populations		++	-		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Higher overall protein conversion efficiency and availability for human consumption in crop-based compared to animal-based farming systems.
2. Reducing food-competing feed demand	Exploit novel feed resources (cover crops, fodder resources covering inter-rows in orchards, etc.)	+	+		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grazing of permanent inter-rows and off-season cover crops with gain of N fertilisation efficiency. Legume crops would increase farm protein self-sufficiency. lower manure collection for cropland fertilisation
	Optimise fodder harvesting and feed use	+	+/-		
	Increase the share of temporary fodder in agroecological crop rotations	--	+		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Legume crops would increase farm protein self-sufficiency.
3. Increasing food availability	Switch from monogastric to herbivore production	+	-		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decreasing ability to efficiently manage and apply manure to cropland soils as animals are less kept indoors Synergies with increased technological ability to extract crop-based food (lower supply for by-products for ruminants)
	Optimise cropland productivity	+	++		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Possible synergies with improved management of limited manure resources
	Optimise crop-based and animal-based food extraction	+	+/-		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lower feed resource if lower by-product production
4. Increasing animal feed use efficiency	Livestock breeding programs	+	+/-		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Possible synergies with increasing feed-use efficiency on novel feed resources. Strengthening the role of grazing can interfere with the organisation and efficiency of the dairy industry
	Maximise fodders digestibility (plant genetics and fodder composition)	+	+/-		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Possible antagonism: lower nutrient supply in manure to fertiliser cropland soils
	Optimise interactions among animal enterprises	+	+/-		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Possible synergies with the exploitation of novel feed resources (i.e mobile housing units for grazing)
5. Increasing system efficiency through circular economy	Maximise the use of food industry by-products and valorise food waste resources and insects-based feed	++	+/-		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trade-off between an increased crop-based food extraction and livestock ability to use by-products
	Increase animal capacity to use non arable lands and rangelands	+	-		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Possible antagonisms with the optimisation of cropland productivity
	Optimise manure recycling efficiency through anaerobic digestion	+/-	+		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using plant-based resources for co-digestion with manure could decrease plant-based food production