

UNIVERSITY OF
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Is it right to maintain intensive livestock farming for sustainable development in the EU?

An ethical opinion

Course: 4302-420 Ethical Reflection on Food and Agriculture

Lecturer: Prof. Claudia Bieling & Dr. Uta Eser

Name: Laura Sophie Wehling (847326)

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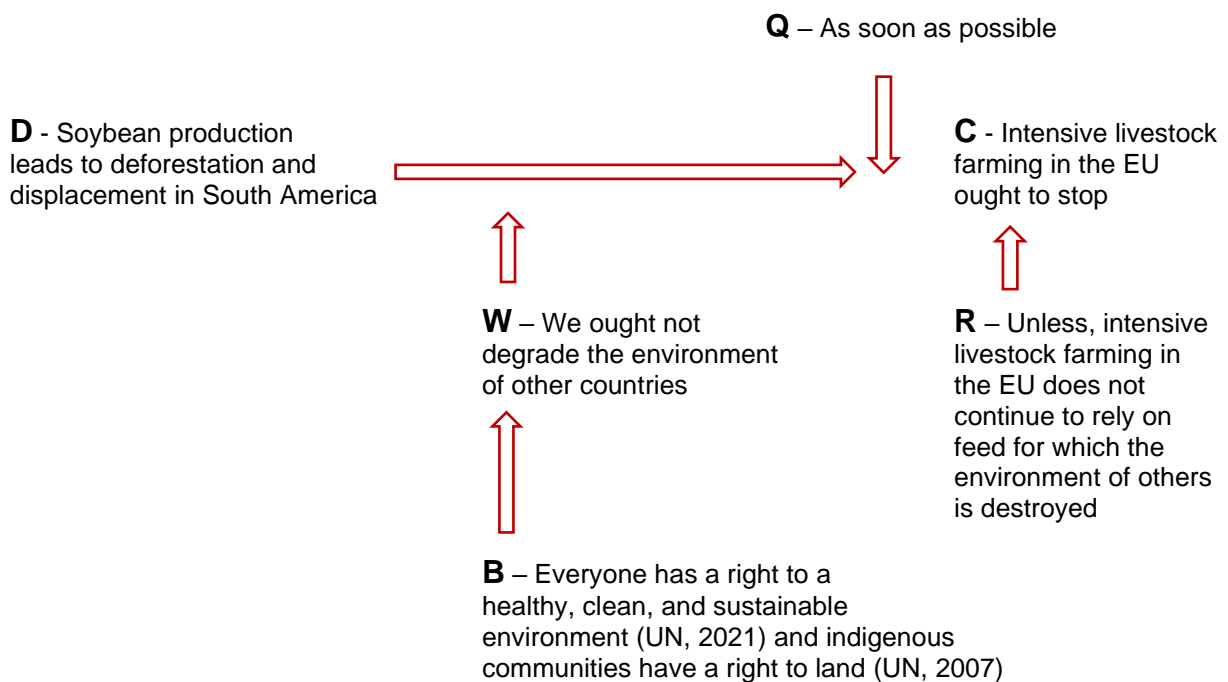
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1. Intensive livestock farming in the EU – Contested, but widespread

In our group, we are discussing the question of ***whether intensive livestock farming is right for sustainable development in the EU***. Intensive livestock farming can be defined as:

“A subset of the solely livestock systems in which less than 10 percent of the dry matter fed to animals is farm produced and in which annual average stocking rates are above ten livestock units (LU) per hectare of agricultural land.” (FAO, 1995, p. 12)

The argument I will discuss below is that intensive livestock farming in the EU ought to be stopped as soon as possible if it continues to rely on importing feed for which the environment in non-EU countries is destroyed. According to Toulmin (2003), the argument under discussion is structured as follows:



D – Data, Q – Qualifier, C – Claim, W – Warrant, B – Backing, R – Rebuttal

First of all, I will provide an overview of the current state of soybean production and its impact on the environment. Subsequently, I will elaborate on the relation of soy production to various actors associated with high soy demand. Finally, I will identify which of the ethical principles of *Prudence*, *Justice*, and *The Good Life* best fits the

argument presented. As shown in Figure 1, the main proportion of imported soy into the EU is coming from Brazil. Therefore, the following sections are mainly focusing on the environmental and social impacts of a high soy demand on Brazil.

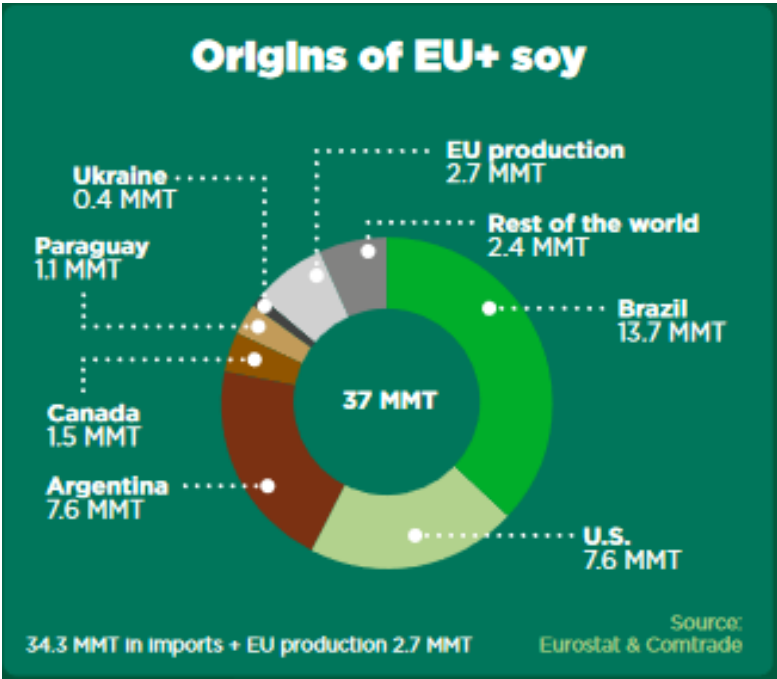


Figure 1: Origins of EU+ soy in 2019 (IDH, 2021).

2. Soy cultivation and its link to deforestation

As a result of the global food distribution, the land and water resources needed for food production in the EU are regularly relocated, virtually transferring their environmental impacts to the producing countries. In the process, total imports into the EU also contribute to global deforestation and land-use conversion. From 2006 to 2013, EU imports accounted for the largest share of global deforestation, before being surpassed by China in 2014 (WWF, 2021). For the period 2005 to 2017, soy was the EU import product that contributed the most to deforestation globally, with the largest share of deforestation occurring in Brazil (WWF, 2021).

Overall, South America is the continent with the highest soy production, accounting for more than 50 % of global production (Karlsson et al., 2021). Furthermore, 70 % of the South American soy is exported, from which the EU imports around 21 % as animal feed (Karlsson et al., 2021). This development reveals an increasing integration of the South American continent into the global agricultural market. Favorable climatic conditions, as well as cheap land and labor, have contributed to the conversion of forests and savannas into agricultural production areas, especially for the rapidly growing soy production (Fehlenberg et al., 2017).

As illustrated in Figure 2, several biomes are now at risk of conversion. The areas most affected by deforestation in South America are in Brazil. The *Amazon* biome with its tropical rainforest, and the *Cerrado*, a biome of savannas and dry forests. Also threatened is the *Gran Chaco*, the second largest forest in South America, stretching across Argentina, Paraguay, and Bolivia. (IDH, 2020)



Figure 2: Biomes in South America at Risk of Conversion (UCSUSA, 2016).

Although the Amazonian Soy Moratorium (ASM) was established in 2006 to prevent the replacement of Amazon forests for soy cultivation, between 2009 and 2016, approximately 60,000 ha were cleared for soy plantations in the municipality of Mato Grosso, Brazil alone (Junior & Lima, 2018). Moreover, a study by Rajão et al. (2020) suggests that about 20 % of soy imported into the EU from the Amazon and Cerrado biomes can be linked to illegal deforestation. Deforestation and the conversion of savannas into farmland destroy the habitat of natural species. The Cerrado biome, for example, is the savanna with the highest number of species in the world (Myers et al., 2000). Moreover, the Brazilian Amazon biome contains the largest carbon stock of global tropical vegetation (Nogueira et al., 2015). Conserving the Amazon forest is therefore of paramount importance for mitigating climate change. Therefore, by externalizing feed production to those fragile biomes, the EU is contributing to the destruction of these unique ecosystems and climate change.

2.1 The level of knowledge and non-knowledge

That high soy demand is associated with environmental degradation and deforestation in South America is well known in the EU and among consumers. The extent of deforestation caused by soybean cultivation can be estimated and clearly defined for individual regions and periods but is difficult to determine overall. Soy is not the sole crop associated with deforestation, and large-scale cattle ranching is also driving the conversion of the Amazon forest to cropland or pasture (Morton et al., 2006). Moreover, it is merely possible to estimate how much of the soybean imports into the EU are derived from illegal deforestation (Rajão et al., 2020). Therefore, the mere correlation can be characterized as knowledge, while the numerical correlation between soy demand and land-use change can be classified as non-knowledge. It is even more complicated to determine numerically how many smallholders and indigenous peoples have been displaced from their lands by soy cultivation. Which can therefore also be seen as a non-knowledge.

Even if it can be considered knowledge, there may still be gradations in how well known the problems are. The deforestation of the Amazon forest is certainly the best-known problem related to the consumption of intensively farmed animal products. The fact that other biomes, such as the Cerrado savannas, are also affected by soy cultivation may be less known to consumers, but only because they might not be deeply concerned with the issue. Furthermore, it is well known that habitat loss and the

intensive use of pesticides associated with intensive soy cultivation threaten biodiversity. Moreover, the extinction of species alters key processes of ecosystems, although the effects are not always known (Hooper et al., 2012).

Widespread awareness of forest loss in the Amazon and its consequences has likely contributed to commitments such as the Amazon Soy Moratorium on zero deforestation as mentioned above. However, other actors involved in decisions to expand soy production seem to have little interest in preserving these unique ecosystems. Most notably, Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro prioritizes agricultural development over conservation or respect for indigenous peoples' rights (IDH, 2020). Thus, the president of the country with the world's largest soy production (OVID, 2021), ignores the risks associated with clearing forests and displacing natural ecosystems for agribusiness. Another serious factor for nature conservation could be the 2019 negotiated trade agreement between the EU and Mercosur, the South American trade bloc comprising Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay. According to Kehoe et al. (2020), sustainability is not a key feature of the trade agreement as it does not include local communities or the implementation of sustainability commitments. However, the trade agreement has yet to be ratified, and the EU has since raised questions about whether the costs associated with deforestation may exceed monetary benefits related to increasing trade (EU, 2020). Moreover, the EU Parliament stated that 'the EU-Mercosur agreement cannot be ratified as it stands' (European Parliament, 2020, p. 12). Finally, it remains to be seen what influence the recently inaugurated German government, which calls itself an alliance for sustainability (SPD et al., 2021), will have on the negotiations.

2.2 Interests and Rights

The underlying interests of deforestation and land degradation in South America are complex and mainly of economic origin. The growing demand for soy has led to an increase in employment opportunities in Brazil, not only for farmers but also in the distribution of soy and for managing the increasing use of machinery in soy production (Toloi et al., 2021). Moreover, soybeans have become the most important Brazilian export commodity in terms of both volume and value (Cattelan & Dall'Agnol, 2018). With the production of such valuable products, an increase in the inhabitant's income might have contributed to the well-being of the people employed with them. Beyond Brazil's economic interests, the interest for cheap meat and other animal-based

products in the EU has led to the expansion of soy usage in livestock production for decades. As feeding animal proteins to livestock is no longer considered a safe diet since the outbreak of mad cow disease in Europe, plant-based proteins from soybeans have become the main feed source used nowadays for fattening poultry, pigs, and cattle (Austin, 2010). Thus, EU consumers of cheap animal products indirectly contribute to the increase in production and associated additional employment opportunities in Brazil.

However, as soy production increases, the rights of smallholders, indigenous communities, and future generations may also be jeopardized. For example, although there is a human right to property (UN, 1948), access to it remains an exclusionary factor for some communities. A study by McKay and Colque (2016) describes the impact of increasing soybean cultivation on smallholder farmers' access to land and machinery in Bolivia. Accordingly, even if they have access to land, however, they often do not have the financial resources to purchase the machinery needed for improved soy production. This excludes them from producing soybeans of the required quality. Similarly, Fearnside (2001) describes that those farmers who can afford to switch to mechanized soybean production in Brazil are displacing smallholders who grow beans or corn, for example. In Brazil, there is also rising awareness among policymakers and in the civil society that access to natural resources such as land is affected by social class, political relations, and cultural stereotypes (Wolford, 2008). Because indigenous communities face cultural stereotypes, are more likely to be of a lower social class, and have less contact with politicians, their discrimination can also be linked to intersectionality. By expanding soybean production in areas where indigenous communities previously farmed their land then undermines their right to land (UN, 2007). Displacing indigenous farmers their diversified farming systems, which would otherwise contribute to the local staple foods consumed in Brazil, are also declining (Nepstad et al., 2006). Additionally, Brazilian government policies also contribute to the growing inequality of farmers by promoting large farmers while small farmers and the rural poor are perceived as cheap labor (Wolford, 2008).

In addition to the current social dimension of high soybean cultivation, the destruction of rainforests and land-use change also have an impact on future generations. That a sustainable development includes the current and the following generation was already defined by the *Brundtland report* as meeting 'the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Keeble, 1988,

p. 16). Accordingly, the Human Rights Council of the United Nations recognized the human right to a healthy and sustainable environment (UN, 2021). Although it is not yet legally binding, it is addressing the issue that the protection of human rights cannot be achieved without the protection of nature (UN, 2021).

2.3 Relation to the ethical principle of *Justice*

In the following, it will be addressed to which of the ethical principles, *Prudence*, *Justice* and the *Good Life*, the argument discussed here is most appropriate. Since there are clear winners and losers in soy production for intensive livestock farming, the issue can be related primarily to the principle of *Justice*. As EU consumption patterns have caused serious environmental and social problems outside the EU, we are acting unfairly towards people in Latin America who are left behind by soy production. Metaphorically speaking, it can be said that with intensive livestock farming in the EU, we “are cutting off branches on which *someone else* is sitting somewhere else” (Eser et al., 2014, p. 89). Although some residents will have higher incomes and greater prosperity as a result of soy production intensification, farmers and communities that have been displaced from their land or market by soy expansion are losing. Moreover, the expansion of soy production comes at the cost of environmental degradation, especially of carbon sinks like the Amazon forest. This contributes to climate change, threatening the livelihoods of future generations. Thus, the people who are benefitting from soy expansion now “are cutting off branches on which *someone else* [...] would like to sit on in the future (Eser et al., 2014, p. 89). As also soil degradation is caused by factors such as intensive livestock farming (UNCCD, 2017), future generations will even have less access to fertile soils. They will be affected by the impacts of deforestation on climate change in the future, so *Justice between Generations* may not be met. By disentangling the different levels of the problem, the moral obligation to reduce the consumption of animal-based products in the EU becomes even stronger. Ultimately, one can further specify the problem under consideration and the connection to the ethical principle of *Justice*. Because of the negative consequences for people on the other side of the globe, this is also a *Global Justice* issue. While consumers in the EU benefit from cheap meat prices, farmers on the other half of the globe are being forced off their land. The issue of *Global Justice* in terms of deforestation is further underpinned by the study of Jorgenson (2006), who concluded that low- and middle-income countries that export largely to high-income countries are more affected by

deforestation. Moreover, this inequality can also be related to the aspect of *Environmental Justice*. As Figure 3 shows, not only European countries but also other high-income countries create excessive environmental footprints compared to countries in the Global South. Outsourcing polluting production often results in rich countries saving on their production costs and that their environment remains undisturbed. However, the countries where this production takes place then have environmental destruction on the local ground. Therefore, the argument concludes with the rebuttal that intensive livestock production in the EU should only continue if it is no longer responsible for the destruction of natural resources in countries of the global South.

Country Overshoot Days 2021

When would Earth Overshoot Day land if the world's population lived like...



Source: National Footprint and Biocapacity Accounts, 2021 Edition
data.footprintnetwork.org



Figure 3: Country Overshoot Days 2021 (Global Footprint Network, 2021).

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