Is Meat the New Oil?

Five Lessons from Fossil Fuel Governance for Industrial Meat Governance

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For decades, the global community has grappled with the increasingly urgent need for an equitable transition away from fossil fuels – achieving some, but inadequate, progress.

Today, there is growing recognition that meat and other animal products, particularly from the industrial systems that enable high levels of meat consumption, also have far-reaching environmental, public health, and social impacts. This industry will need to transform on a similar time frame in order to achieve climate and broader sustainable development goals.

This raises important questions: Can – and should – governance lessons from fossil fuels be applied to industrial animal agriculture? And might fossil fuel transitions, in turn, benefit from insights emerging from efforts to transform food systems? My organisation, the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), has begun exploring these questions, building on years of work that span both fossil-fuel governance and food-system transformation.

Engaging with these questions can help stakeholders to share insights, strategies and skills, pool resources, and better understand how the two sectors are interlinked. At the same time, recognising key differences can help avoid missteps when translating lessons across sectors. Below, we offer five initial insights emerging from this work.

Lesson 1: Challenge industry legitimacy to shift social norms - but tailor messaging to reflect complexity.

Both the fossil fuel and industrial meat sectors wield powerful influence, benefiting from subsidies, favourable regulation, and a history of externalising the environmental and social costs of their impacts.

Like oil majors, big meat and dairy corporations have sought to undermine environmental policies and spread disinformation to protect their dominance. And like fossil fuels, industrial animal agriculture is deeply entrenched in wealthier countries and expanding in lower-income ones – often with international support.

A growing literature on "anti-fossil fuel norms" highlights how the standard of appropriate behaviour may gradually be shifting to discourage production, support, and use of fossil fuels. This is reflected, for instance, in fossil fuel divestment campaigns and successful court cases against fossil fuel companies.

Similar tactics are emerging in the industrial meat sector, such as litigation against industry greenwashing, campaigns to end international support for industrial animal agriculture, and calls to ban factory farming. Shifting norms around the industrial meat sector could similarly help to delegitimise harmful practices and drive policy change towards more sustainable and equitable food systems.

While simple, unified messages can be effective in driving societal change, they may fail to capture the complexities of transition – in particular the equity implications for low-income countries, workers, and consumers. Our work has therefore highlighted the need to pair calls for fossil fuel phase-down with tangible support for affected communities.

Animal agriculture arguably presents even more complexity. Alongside powerful agribusinesses, this sector includes millions of small-scale and backyard farmers who provide significant social benefits, including by providing a vital source of nutrition and livelihoods in lower-income countries. Moreover, farmers typically enjoy broader public support than the fossil fuel sector. As a result, policies targeting industrial meat risk backlash if perceived as undermining farming traditions or rural livelihoods. Industry groups often exploit this by using romanticised images of

small-scale farmers to deflect attention from industrial practices.

Given these dynamics, it is essential to understand which narratives most effectively build public support and unite broad coalitions behind a more sustainable and equitable food system.

Lesson 2: To accelerate transitions, ensure alternatives are available, affordable, and appealing.

Access to affordable energy and nutrition is fundamental to sustainable development. Fortunately, alternatives to both fossil fuels and industrially produced animal products exist that can support this goal with fewer harms.

In the case of food, shifting diets toward more whole, plant-based foods – such as legumes, grains, fruits, and vegetables – offers significant health benefits, including better nutritional outcomes as well as reduced risks of zoonoses and antimicrobial resistance. But access to these foods is not guaranteed everywhere. Even in high-income countries, many communities lack access to these options or face prohibitively high prices. Governments can help address these imbalances through measures such as lowering VAT on healthy plant-based foods.

Still, not all consumers are ready to significantly reduce their meat intake, which is often culturally significant and deeply ingrained in habits and traditions. This is where alternative proteins – including plant-based and cultivated meats – can help. Our work with the UN Environment Programme has shown that particularly in high- and upper-middle-income countries, these products offer significant promise of environmental and public health benefits compared to conventional meat products, while potentially maintaining consumer appeal.

To realise this potential, alternative proteins will require public investment. Yet at present, government support to animal agriculture vastly exceeds that to alternatives. In the energy sector, early public support helped wind and solar power become cost-competitive. A similar approach could accelerate the development and accessibility of alternatives to conventional animal products. Strategic public funding for open-access research and commercialisation can help lower costs, increase access, and enhance consumer appeal.

Lesson 3: Invest in just and equitable transitions.

The energy transition has drawn growing attention to the need for "just transitions" – policies that support workers, communities, consumers, and other stakeholders during periods of economic and social change.

Experience from the energy sector has shown how national governments can support inclusive economic diversification by engaging with miners and local communities and by investing in worker reskilling. At the international level, several Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs) now also aim to support a fair shift to clean energy in lower-income countries, although they also face challenges, including funding gaps and difficulties in aligning expectations between donor and recipient countries.

As we highlight in our work, a similar approach is needed to guide efforts to reduce industrial meat production and consumption. Calls are growing for similar mechanisms in the food sector – for example, by initiating inclusive processes to involve stakeholders in transition planning and economic diversification, piloting projects where animal farms are repurposed for alternative uses, and introducing just transition funds for animal agriculture.

One often-overlooked consideration in this context is that billions of animals are also affected by changes in the food system. Unfortunately, some interventions aimed at reducing emissions from the farmed animal sector risk worsening animal welfare. As our work shows, these approaches may also undermine public health, given the close links between animal health and welfare and human health, as recognised in the One Health approach. For instance, shifting away from beef towards chicken production may lower greenhouse gas emissions but could increase – or at least maintain – the risk of zoonotic disease spread and antimicrobial resistance.

A just transition in the food system should therefore aim to minimise and mitigate adverse impacts on animal health and welfare. This principle can also

translate to the energy sector, where land use and infrastructure development can significantly affect biodiversity, both on land and in water.

Lesson 4: Account for the power of culture and psychology in driving change.

Food choices are particularly complex and sensitive, deeply intertwined with identity, culture, and taste. Policymakers are often hesitant to introduce regulations in this area, concerned about potential backlash. In contrast, energy choices are typically seen as primarily driven by cost and reliability. However, in some contexts, energy transitions are confronted with similar sensitivities, such as when challenging car culture, shifting cooking fuel preferences, or reducing air travel.

In both cases, progress doesn't need to rely solely on national government regulation. In the United States, plant-based milks now account for about 15% of the retail milk market, an increase driven largely by expanded product options and consumer demand.

At SEI, we work with a wide range of actors – from individuals to schools to retailers – to help drive positive change in the food system, with behavioural science offers valuable tools for change. Our work suggests that some nudges – such as making more sustainable and healthy meals the default option – can significantly shift consumption patterns without restricting choice. For example, New York City's public hospitals now serve healthful plant-based meals as the default, reducing emissions, cutting costs, and achieving an above-90% patient satisfaction rate.

These kinds of interventions can be scaled across both sectors. Importantly, they also offer a way to build momentum and demonstrate progress in areas where political leadership may be lagging. In doing so, they can help create the enabling conditions for more ambitious policy action down the line.

Lesson 5: Build inclusive coalitions for greater impact and justice.

In energy policy, inclusive coalitions – spanning environmental organisations, frontline communities, and youth groups – have often been crucial in building momentum for action. For example, resistance to the Keystone XL pipeline brought together Indigenous communities, grassroots networks, environmental organisations, farmers, landowners, and other stakeholders in a powerful alliance that successfully challenged the project. There are also international examples, such as the Powering Past Coal Alliance, the Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance, and the Friends of Fossil Fuel Subsidy Reform, which demonstrate how global coordination, capacity building, and lesson sharing can accelerate progress.

Food system transitions can benefit from similarly broad alliances. By uniting progressive farmers, public health advocates, environmental justice communities, animal welfare organisations and others, stakeholders can cultivate a shared vision and strengthen their political impact to help reduce reliance on industrial meat, build momentum for alternatives, and guide global food systems toward greater sustainability and justice.

Conclusion

Meat might not be the new oil in every sense – but the challenges of transforming an entrenched sector, navigating complex power and equity issues, and responding to the urgency of change are strikingly similar. By learning from both the successes and setbacks of the fossil fuel transition, we have a valuable opportunity to steer the future of food in a better direction.

That means challenging harmful industry norms while recognising the sector's complexity and the varied realities communities face. It also means ensuring suitable alternatives are available, supporting those impacted by change, and using behavioural insights to spark healthier, more sustainable habits. Crucially, it requires building bold, inclusive movements capable of driving lasting, systemic change.

Our energy and food systems aren't inevitable – they're shaped by policies, choices, and power. By learning across sectors, we gain a powerful tool for shifting the needle.

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