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Is agricultural intensification in The Netherlands running up to its limits?

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Highlights

- â€¢ Highly intensive agriculture in the Netherlands and elsewhere already has a large environmental and social footprint.
- â€¢ Still, the Dutch debate about sustainable agriculture is characterised by a one sided focus on the need to produce more food.
- â€¢ Trade-offs between population size, food consumption patterns and land spared for nature should be better acknowledged in policies.
- â€¢ Policies addressing damaging consumption are practically non-existent.

Abstract

Environmental pressures posed through human activities are expected to further increase due to growing population numbers and increasing per capita consumption. It will be crucial that the sum of all pressures leaves the planet within sustainability thresholds. The huge challenge for agriculture is to double its food production without further deteriorating the environment, but there is little consensus on how to do this. At the global scale, "sustainable intensification" is seen as an important strategy. At best, intensification improves the utilization of resources, but it also increases emissions per ha and may go hand in hand with specialisation, increases in the scale of farming and regional concentration. A typical example of a sector characterised by intensification, scale enlargement and regional concentration is the Dutch livestock sector. To consolidate and strengthen the Dutch position as second agricultural exporter in the world, this process is still continuing, linked with constant efforts to further improve economic and environmental efficiencies through farm size enlargement and adoption of additional technologies. However, the industrial and inherently resource-intensive character of this livestock production leaves numerous sustainability issues unaddressed, provoking new questions and controversy in Dutch society. Sound policies start with the acknowledgement of trade-offs between population size, food consumption patterns and land spared for nature. Therefore, a legitimate, but seldom asked question is which part of the total effort needed to feed the human population should be on more production and which part on limiting population growth, changing human diets and global redistribution of wealth.



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Keywords

Food production; Food consumption; Sustainability; Environment; Resource use efficiency; Biodiversity; Extensification

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