

THE ASSEMBLY ROOMS

After-Dinner Conversation

Here Jean-François Millet's painting (Het Angelus, 1859) has been adapted. The farm labourer stands around with a cloth cap and the barrow is now filled with the by-products of fertilizer and pesticide abuse, hence the empty food basket.

Sustainable agriculture is vital to survival, even in the short-term. The world's cultivated soils have been exhausted and degraded by the use of chemical fertilisers, by overgrazing and over-tilling. Since the 19th century, the world's soils have lost around 60% of their original carbon stock as a result of the way humans have used the land; much of this has oxidized upon exposure to air and become CO₂, adding to climate change.

That process can be reversed and is a vital way of storing carbon and encouraging good farming practices. Regenerative agricultural methods, such as planting fields year-round in crops or other cover, and agro-forestry, which combines crops, trees and animal husbandry, can play a key role in reducing CO₂ while also boosting soil productivity and increasing resilience to extreme weather.

At the same time, it is vital to view food as a resource that can feed a global population. In Europe, protein consumption is about 70% higher than recommended by the World Health Organisation and much higher than the levels recommended for reducing the incidence of cancer, type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

An astonishing 75% of the world's agricultural land is devoted to raising animals for consumption, including both the land used to grow crops for animal feed, and pasture and grazing lands. The enormous population of livestock (1.5 billion cattle, 1 billion pigs, 1 billion sheep, 20 billion chickens) shows that there is still slack in the system if we use land, water and labour to keep animals just for human consumption. This 'second population explosion' of livestock is an added pressure on finite resources