Asian Australas. J. Biosci. Biotechnol. 2026, 11(1), 1-4; https://doi.org/10.3329/aajbb.v11i1.86200

Asian-Australasian Journal of Bioscience and Biotechnology
ISSN 2414-1283 (Print) 2414-6293 (Online)
https://www.ebupress.com/journal/aajbb/

Editorial

The moral code of food: the silent responsibility of choices on our plate

Mustafa Atasever*

Department of Food Hygiene and Technology, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Ataturk University, Erzurum, Turkey

*Corresponding author: Mustafa Atasever, Department of Food Hygiene and Technology, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Ataturk University, Erzurum, Turkey. E-mail: atasever@atauni.edu.tr

Received: 13 November 2025/Accepted: 27 December 2025/Published: 07 January 2026

Food is never just fuel; every meal we eat carries a hidden story about land, water, animals, workers, technology, and culture. In today's globalized food system, this story is often invisible to consumers, yet its consequences are profound for planetary health and for the lives of humans and animals alike (FAO *et al*., 2023). The concept of a "moral code of food" encourages us to view eating not only as a biological act but also as an ethical one. Rather than serving as a strict rulebook, this moral code can be understood as a set of guiding principles that help us evaluate how our food is produced, distributed, and consumed (Atasever, 2004; Atasever and Alişarlı, 2020). Upon closer examination, at least five intertwined dimensions emerge, climate and environmental sustainability, justice and equity for workers, animal welfare, food waste, and food safety and information. Together, they suggest that each meal is a small but meaningful act of responsibility.

The first dimension concerns the impact of our diets on the planet's climate and ecosystems. Modern food production is a major driver of greenhouse gas emissions, land-use change, biodiversity loss, and freshwater depletion (Poore and Nemecek, 2018; FAO, 2018). Animal-based foods, especially those from ruminants, generally impose a much larger environmental burden than plant-based foods when measured per kilogram of product or per unit of protein. Intensive monoculture cropping for feed and commodities further degrades soil, accelerates erosion, and diminishes agrobiodiversity that has been nurtured over centuries. This erosion is evident in the loss of traditional varieties of cereals, fruits, and vegetables worldwide. However, these patterns are not inevitable. Agroecological and regenerative farming approaches demonstrate that it is possible to produce food while enhancing soil health, conserving water, and protecting biodiversity (Altieri, 2018). Shifting dietary patterns toward more plant-rich, less resource-intensive foods, combined with policies that reward climate-friendly production rather than high-emission commodities, constitutes a central pillar of an ethical food system. For countries like Türkiye, which lie in important centers of crop origin and diversity, protecting agrobiodiversity is also a matter of cultural heritage and long-term food security.

The second dimension focuses on justice and equity for the people whose labor makes food available. Long and complex supply chains often obscure the conditions under which farm workers, processing-plant employees, and food service workers live and work. In many regions, primary producers and workers receive only a small fraction of the final retail price, while facing occupational risks, limited social protection, and income insecurity (HLPE, 2014). Migrant workers in agriculture and slaughterhouses may endure precarious contracts, exposure to heat and chemicals, and barriers to accessing health care or legal recourse. In this context, the "cheapness" of food can mask a high human cost. Initiatives such as fair trade, worker-driven social responsibility schemes, cooperatives, and community-supported agriculture aim to redistribute value and power more equitably;

however, they still reach only a small share of global production. Achieving justice in the food system requires recognizing the dignity and rights of everyone in the chain from field to fork, as well as ensuring that consumers, companies, and governments accept their shared responsibility to prevent exploitation. This perspective aligns with broader ethical concerns in food hygiene and public health, where veterinarians and food safety professionals work at the intersection of animal health, food production, and consumer protection (Atasever, 2025).

Animal ethics forms a third, inseparable dimension. Scientific advances in animal welfare and cognition have increasingly demonstrated that farm animals are sentient beings capable of experiencing pain, stress, curiosity, and social bonds (Fraser, 2008). Widely recognized welfare frameworks emphasize that suffering can occur in intensive systems when animals are confined at high stocking densities, deprived of opportunities for natural behavior, or transported and slaughtered under stressful conditions. Religious and philosophical traditions have long grappled with human duties toward animals. In Islamic thought, for example, kindness to animals and avoidance of unnecessary suffering are recurring themes; traditional halal slaughter rules recommend the use of a sharp knife, a swift cut, and that one animal should not witness the slaughter of another (Atasever and Alişarlı, 2020; Alişarlı and Atasever, 2025). Contemporary discussions on the halal concept increasingly integrate both animal welfare and food safety into slaughterhouse and meat inspection practices (Atasever and Alişarlı, 2025). Today, these religious perspectives intersect with secular ethics and consumer concerns. Some individuals respond by adopting vegetarian, vegan, or flexitarian diets, while others call for higher welfare standards and transparent labeling to ensure that animal products come from systems that respect basic welfare principles. A realistic moral code of food does not prescribe a single diet; rather, it requires that we confront honestly what our appetite for animal products means for the lives of animals and strive to minimize avoidable suffering wherever possible.

The fourth dimension is food waste, which starkly highlights the gap between abundance and need. Globally, a significant portion of food produced for human consumption is never eaten, being lost or wasted somewhere between farm and fork. It is estimated that roughly one-third of edible food is lost or wasted, amounting to about 1.3 billion tonnes per year (Gustavsson *et al*., 2011; HLPE, 2014). This waste represents squandered water, land, energy, and labor, and it contributes significantly to greenhouse gas emissions when discarded food decomposes. Meanwhile, hundreds of millions of people experience food insecurity, micronutrient deficiencies, or outright hunger (FAO *et al*., 2023). Ethically, it is difficult to justify a system that allows so much to be thrown away while so many go without. Reducing waste requires action at multiple levels: improved infrastructure and storage in low-income regions, smarter inventory management in processing and retail, clearer date labeling, donation and redistribution schemes, and a cultural shift that rejects the normalization of waste. Ethical teachings from various traditions can serve as powerful allies in this effort. In Islam, for instance, wastefulness (israf) is explicitly discouraged, aligning closely with modern sustainability goals and reinforcing the notion that wasting food and resources is morally problematic (Atasever and Alişarlı, 2020). Embracing the ethic that “wasting food is wasting life” can inspire individuals, households, and institutions to change their behavior.

Finally, the moral code of food must include a commitment to food safety, truthful information, and fair access. Consumers have the right to expect that food will not make them sick, that chemical and biological hazards are kept under control, and that labeling and marketing are not deceptive (FAO and WHO, 2019; WHO and FAO, 2023). However, the complexity of modern food chains, the prevalence of ultra-processed products, and the sometimes opaque use of new technologies (from additives to genetic modification) can undermine trust. Food safety regulators, veterinarians, and food scientists play a central role in identifying and controlling hazards, but ethical responsibility also extends to how risks and benefits are communicated (Atasever *et al*., 2015; Atasever, 2025). Clear, evidence-based information enables consumers to make choices that reflect both health and values. At the same time, the notion of "freedom of choice" must be tempered by the recognition that many people live in environments with limited access to healthy, affordable foods or face economic constraints that push them toward cheap, low-quality diets (FAO *et al*., 2023). An ethical food system, therefore, requires not only safe products and honest labels but also policies that improve access to nutritious, culturally appropriate food for all and that do not leave low-income communities with the least healthy options. In this sense, food safety, nutrition, and social justice are deeply intertwined.

Across these five dimensions, food ethics emerges not as a niche topic for specialists but as a vital concern intersecting climate policy, labor rights, animal welfare, public health, and social justice (Fraser, 2008; Poore and Nemecek, 2018; FAO *et al*., 2023). The encouraging news is that improvements in one area often reinforce progress in others. Dietary shifts toward plant-rich, minimally processed foods can reduce environmental pressure, enhance human health, and decrease the demand for intensive animal production (Poore and Nemecek,

2018; Singer, 2023). Supporting local producers and fair labor practices can strengthen communities while lowering transportation emissions and improving food freshness. Reducing food waste simultaneously addresses hunger and alleviates environmental burdens (Gustavsson *et al*., 2011; HLPE, 2014). A realistic moral code of food does not demand perfection from individuals; instead, it encourages continuous, pragmatic improvement in the choices made by individuals, institutions, and governments. Each meal becomes a small yet meaningful act of citizenship, reflecting the kind of food system we wish to support. Looking ahead, the challenge is not only to develop more sustainable and just methods of food production but also to cultivate the ethical imagination necessary to recognize the connections on our plates—and to act accordingly (Atasever, 2004; Atasever and Alişarlı, 2025).

Ethical approval and informed consent
Not applicable.

Data availability
Not applicable.

Conflict of interest
None to declare.

Author's contribution
Conceptualization, formal analysis, writing–original draft preparation, review and editing: Mustafa Atasever. The author has read and approved the final version of the editorial.

References
Altieri MA, 2018. Agroecology: The science of sustainable agriculture. 2nd edn. CRC Press, Boca Raton, FL, USA.

Alişarlı M and M Atasever, 2025. Hayvan refahının kesimhane ve et muayenesi süreçlerindeki önemi ve etkili uygulamalar [The importance of animal welfare in slaughterhouse and meat inspection processes and effective practices]. Akademisyen Kitabevi, Ankara, Turkey.

Atasever M, 2004. Organic product processing. Panel on the Organic Agriculture Potential, Problems and Solution Proposals in the Eastern Anatolia Region. Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs and Food and Agriculture Organization, Erzurum, Turkey.

Atasever M, 2025. Veterinarians' role in global food safety and public health. Asian Australas. J. Biosci. Biotechnol., 10: 1-5.

Atasever M and G Aydenizöz, 2000. Presence of Listeria monocytogenes in raw milk and dairy products in Erzurum, Turkey. Turk. J. Vet. Anim. Sci., 24: 199-205.

Atasever M and M Alişarlı, 2020. Helâl gıda [Halal food]. J. Halal Lifestyle, 2: 95-101.

Atasever M and M Alişarlı, 2025. Et muayenesi: Tarihsel gelişim, güncel uygulamalar ve gıda güvenliği üzerine etkileri [Meat inspection: Historical development, current practices and impacts on food safety]. Akademisyen Kitabevi, Ankara, Turkey.

Atasever M, H İçe and İ Yıldırım, 2015. Occurrence of some bacterial pathogens and heavy metals in raw milk sold in Erzurum, Turkey. Kafkas Univ. Vet. Fak. Derg., 21: 281-286.

FAO, 2018. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2018: Building climate resilience for food security and nutrition. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome, Italy.

FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2023. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023: Urbanization, agrifood systems transformation and healthy diets across the rural–urban continuum. FAO, Rome, Italy.

FAO and WHO, 2019. Food safety risk management: Evidence-informed policies and decisions, considering multiple factors. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations / World Health Organization, Rome, Italy.

Fraser D, 2008. Understanding animal welfare: The science in its cultural context. Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, UK.

Gustavsson J, C Cederberg and U Sonesson, 2011. Global food losses and food waste: Extent, causes and prevention. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome, Italy.

HLPE, 2014. Food losses and waste in the context of sustainable food systems. A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security. FAO, Rome, Italy.

Poore J and T Nemecek, 2018. Reducing food's environmental impacts through producers and consumers. Science, 360: 987-992.

Singer P, 2023. Animal liberation now: The definitive classic renewed. HarperCollins, New York, USA.

WHO and FAO, 2023. Food safety and public health: Key issues and future directions. World Health Organization and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Geneva/Rome.