

Animal welfare: a vital asset for a more sustainable world

Vision Paper



World Organisation
for Animal Health
Founded in 1924

INTRODUCTION

Animal welfare is a complex and sensitive issue. It puts into question our relationship with animals and our ethical responsibility towards those species used or affected by human communities for various purposes. A topic of growing public interest, particularly from an ethical perspective, animal welfare should also be considered through the lens of more sustainable and responsible human interactions with animals. Indeed, animal welfare cannot be tackled in isolation from a broader context, where trade-offs must be made to strike a balance between societal needs and constraints. Modern social perceptions and scientific considerations are challenging current practices, particularly regarding animal production systems, which one fifth of the global population is engaged in.

It is time for a paradigm shift in the way humans interact with animals – for their benefit and ours.



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**Almost 1/5th
of the global
population**

is involved in livestock
production or the
processing and
marketing of food of
animal origin [1].

An issue of growing concern

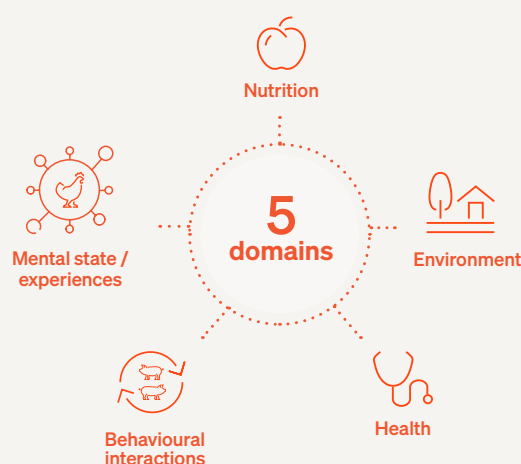
Since the dawn of civilisation, human communities have interacted with animals, using them for food, clothing, traction and labour. Annually, over 80 billion terrestrial animals (chicken, duck, pig, goat, cattle, turkey) [2] are raised and slaughtered for meat consumption. This is without counting the number of aquatic animals farmed and slaughtered for consumption. Animals also form a critical and unique source of income, transport, protection, recreation and companionship. However, maintaining a balance between utilising them and respecting their welfare is a complex and often controversial issue. Animal welfare is subject to differing perceptions, resources and capacities, and has significant economic and trade policy implications.

A multi-faceted issue, animal welfare encompasses scientific, ethical, economic, cultural, legal, social, religious and political aspects. The basis for assessments of animal quality of life has long been linked to cultural considerations. In recent decades, however, numerous studies have provided sound, scientifically based arguments for the detrimental impact that poor animal welfare has on animal production and beyond.

Today, animal welfare is at the forefront of public debate: consumers are increasingly concerned about how their food is produced, especially with how animals are reared, transported and slaughtered. This has led to a shift in consumption patterns. In line with these concerns, some governments have introduced animal welfare measures with implications for international trade. Undoubtedly, this presents challenges to current production models and other activities impacting animal welfare, such as disease control measures. As a result, animal welfare is an increasingly critical public policy issue, both nationally and internationally.

Animal welfare must be distinguished from animal cruelty

- **Animal welfare** refers to an animal's physical and mental state in relation to the conditions in which it lives and dies [3].



The five domains model is a framework for assessing the welfare needs of all animal species when under human control.

- **Animal cruelty** refers to the intentional infliction of harm to an animal or acts of neglect. This includes the failure to provide an animal with necessary food, water, shelter or veterinary care.

Animal welfare: a key driver of sustainability

Perceptions of animal welfare often vary according to a country's socio-economic status, which determines the level of awareness and the capacity to prioritise the issue. Beyond the ethical questions, it is important to acknowledge the benefits that come with improved animal welfare. In fact, animal welfare is not an isolated technical question specific to the animal sector; rather, it affects society more broadly, with implications for animal and human health, the economy, the environment and sustainable development.

Though improvements to animal welfare require targeted investment, this is offset by a host of benefits, such as more sustainable animal husbandry and production, as well as more positive human interactions with all animals.

The World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) works to guide its Members towards *'a world where the welfare of animals is respected, promoted and advanced, in ways that complement the pursuit of animal health, human well-being, socio-economic development and environmental sustainability'*[4].

Animal welfare and animal health are mutually beneficial

Better animal health contributes to better animal welfare. In particular, control of terrestrial and aquatic animal diseases not only reduces pain and distress for animals but also reduces the need to cull to prevent the spread of diseases that can have a high economic impact or that pose a risk to public health. Here, the use of preventive tools, such as vaccination, is crucial for combating contagious animal diseases (e.g. foot and mouth disease or peste des petits ruminants). These measures help farmers protect the health of their herds and ensure a better quality of life for their animals.

In turn, enhancing animal welfare has a positive impact on animal health. By improving the management of production systems and reducing overcrowding, we can reduce the disease burden on animals, as well as injuries and subsequent infections. These factors then reduce the need for different treatments, including antimicrobials.

Animal welfare practices reduce animal and human public health risks, such as antimicrobial resistance, and make food production more sustainable.

“ Improving animal welfare has multiple benefits for farming systems and society as a whole. ”

Animal welfare helps protect human well-being

The fate of animals is inextricably linked to that of humans, as domestic and wild animals are always interacting with the environment. These interactions benefit society and the use of animals in agriculture in the form of companionship, recreation and entertainment, thereby contributing significantly to human well-being [5].

Treating animals with respect fosters empathy and compassion in individuals and communities, contributing to positive mental health and social well-being. Indeed, a better environment for animals is often a better environment for farmers, abattoir workers and everyone else involved in animal production.

Improving animal welfare in farming is becoming integral to the social acceptability of animal use, and therefore to the sustainability of animal-based food supply chains and related livelihoods. Consumers in many countries across the world are increasingly buying locally produced food for environmental reasons and seeking to avoid pain and stress for animals caused by long-distance transport. Some social movements go further, advocating for complete bans on the use of animal products. This threatens several types of production systems in the long-term, which should lead us to think about the changes that need to be made to production systems [6].

To preserve the bond between humans and animals, any system that involves or impacts animals, including animal production systems and the various links in the food chain, must integrate animal welfare principles to avoid injury, lasting fear, stress, or brutal changes to their environment.

Animal welfare has multiple socio-economic benefits

Quantifying the impact of poor animal welfare is a complex task. While counting the number of animals kept in a lorry or barn to assess population density is straightforward, it is more difficult to accurately quantify the losses in meat quality or bruising that are caused by stress or injury, for example. Therefore, finding the optimal trade-off between the social costs and benefits of a given production model can present a challenge. This involves reconciling the competing demands of improving animal welfare in contrast to maintaining human livelihoods and economic profit.

Improving the welfare of farm animals is recognised as having a positive impact on the efficiency, quality, marketability, and overall economics of the entire slaughter-based system and supply chain [7]. For example, improving animal handling during transport and the slaughter process improves the quality of products (e.g. meat, milk or eggs), thereby increasing productivity. This benefits food security and producer livelihoods by facilitating market access and improving public perception of the meat and fish industries. Moreover, it can also reduce costly injuries to workers.

Industry management can reap economic benefits by voluntarily investing in well-designed animal facilities and equipment, as well as training personnel to ensure proper animal handling.



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Transport conditions and their effects on welfare and carcass bruising (Uruguay)

Evaluating over 15,000 beef cattle raised in pasture-based production systems, a study conducted in Uruguay found that 60% had at least one injury or bruise [8]. Improving the welfare of cattle during transport, a major stressor for animals, can reduce the amount of bruising on carcasses and the associated economic losses.



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Improved animal welfare reduces the risk of costly injuries to professionals involved in the food chain, particularly farmers or slaughterhouse workers.

Animal welfare supports environmental sustainability

When animals are treated well, they are more productive and less prone to disease. They also require less feed and land for a given level of productivity, and they generate fewer pollutants that could enter bodies of water and impact aquatic ecosystems. Thus, animal welfare supports responses to environmental challenges. This is particularly important as society increasingly contends with the current and future effects of climate change [9].

Transforming animal production systems to improve animal welfare can mitigate environmental challenges.

Improved animal welfare contributes to a more sustainable world

Animal welfare contributes to achieving several of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), in particular:

- ensuring good health and wellbeing (SDG3),
- preserving life below water (SDG14),
- fostering responsible consumption and production (SDG12).

In turn, animal welfare can benefit from other advances in the SDGs, such as better education or reduced use of antimicrobials led by better health management [10].

Cross-sector partnerships are crucial to generate such win-win situations. In this regard, improving animal welfare is a means of supporting four of the pillars of sustainable development: People, Planet, Prosperity and Partnerships [11].

Improved animal welfare practices are necessary to better address current and future global challenges

Animal welfare is a responsibility shared between governments, communities, the people who own, care for, use or interact with animals, the general public, educational institutions, veterinarians, and scientists. Owners and producers of livestock and aquatic animals are key actors in this and are therefore critical to ensuring the welfare of their animals. However, it is crucial to note that they are faced with economic constraints, animal health risks and, in many cases, precarious living conditions. Mutual recognition and constructive engagement between all relevant stakeholders are vital to achieving sustainable improvements.

WOAH is committed to assisting countries with improving the welfare of animals in all instances involving the use of animals by humans, or for any interaction that may affect the welfare or health status of an animal population. The Organisation currently focuses on the following areas: transport, production systems, slaughter and killing for disease control purposes, animal health and the appropriate use of medicines. WOAH's support to national Animal Health Services is grounded in rigorous, independent and scientific expertise that increasingly incorporates the cross-cutting nature of global challenges. This scientific expertise forms the basis of WOAH's Global Strategy [4] and its international standards on animal welfare, which guide national authorities in developing action plans and related legislation. Since the definitions of animal welfare are subject to interpretation, legislation is key to finding common ground at national, regional, and international levels. Regulations must be realistic, enforceable, and adapted to each context. Indeed, there is no one-size-fits-all approach that can ensure a high level of welfare for all animals.

Regulations are also important for trade negotiations regarding animals and animal products, as some countries are taking more restrictive measures to ensure animal welfare on their territory. In this context, WOAH's science-based standards have a more apparent pivotal role, setting the bar for minimum animal welfare requirements that ensure primary needs are met, and providing a basis for trade negotiations. Thus, these standards deserve strong advocacy support from all stakeholders.

WOAH fosters a dialogue on animal welfare in multilateral debates across countries, stakeholders and sectors to find common ground on the varied perceptions of animal welfare, while also discussing challenges and monitoring progress.

The Organisation seeks to continually question the relevance of its mandate regarding animal welfare. Particularly, this involves re-examining how animal welfare should be addressed beyond WOAH's long-standing focus on food-producing animals.

Animal welfare is an evolving issue, and many human activities that affect or involve animals – including livestock farming – must undergo transformative adaptations to remain sustainable. In this regard, scientific advances will play a key role in understanding how new technologies and knowledge can be used to make our interactions with animals more respectful of their welfare.



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