

Policy brief: acting on animal welfare for sustainable animal production

Recognition of the role of animal welfare in sustainable livestock and agrifood systems

Animal welfare has long been recognised by the United Nation system, particularly FAO, as a crucial contributing factor to addressing environmental crises and advancing sustainable development. Recent examples include:

- 2014-2016: Strong recommendations to promote and improve animal welfare in the livestock sector by the Committee on World Food Security¹.
- 2019: The Global Sustainable Development Report² highlighted animal welfare as a key issue to be specifically addressed by the UN system.
- 2020: The UN Secretary-General recognised animal sentience and expressed the need to promote animal welfare in his Report on Harmony with Nature (A/75/266, paragraph 42)³, in which he noted that “*non-human animals are sentient beings, not mere property, and must be afforded respect and legal recognition*”.
- 2022: Member States adopted UNEA resolution 5/1⁴ on “Animal welfare, the environment and sustainable development Nexus” in which it was acknowledged that “*animal welfare can contribute to addressing environmental challenges, promoting the One Health approach and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals*”.
- 2023: UN Member States called to “*Calls for increased ambition and urgency of action to protect working animals and to strengthen global efforts to ensure that animal health and welfare can contribute to addressing challenges and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals*” in UN General Assembly Resolution 78/168 on “Agriculture Development, Food security and Nutrition”⁵.
- 2023: FAO acknowledged the need to integrate work on livestock production with animal, environmental and human health, and welfare as pillar 4 of its strategic framework for sustainable livestock transformation⁶ and clarified that Sustainable Livestock Transformation requires that attention be “*given to animal health and welfare due to their links with improved productivity, human health, and environmental health*”⁷.

¹ 2014 - Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems (RAI), <https://www.fao.org/3/a-au866e.pdf>, and 2016 - Sustainable Agricultural Development for Food Security and Nutrition, What Roles for Livestock?, https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/cfs/CFS43/MS207_Food_Sec_General_SAD_Livestock_en.pdf

² https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/24797GSDR_report_2019.pdf

³ <https://undocs.org/en/A/75/266>

⁴ UNEP/EA.5/Res.1, Animal welfare – environment – sustainable development Nexus, <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/39795/ANIMAL%20WELFARE%e2%80%93ENVIRONMENT%e2%80%93SUSTAINABLE%20DEVELOPMENT%20NEXUS.%20English.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

⁵ A/RES/78/168, Agriculture development, food security and nutrition, <https://www.undocs.org/A/RES/78/168>

⁶ FAO. 2023. Sustainable livestock transformation – A vision for FAO’s work on animal production and health. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc7474en>

⁷ FAO Global Conference on Sustainable Livestock Transformation; Concept Note, September 2023, <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/1e7c61b7-a115-4266-8c91-ab4b5fc0b90d/content>

Importantly, these references to animal welfare encompass all types of production and working animals, regardless of the environments and systems in which they are kept. The benefits and connections between animal welfare and the outcomes outlined in the document below are largely grounded in the evidence that good welfare reduces the negative effects of stress on an animal's health, which has a positive feedback loop to further improve their welfare.

Detailed examples of the evidence behind these summaries in this policy brief can be found in the *GASL Technical background paper "Animal welfare for production and working animals: evidence and need for action"*.

Recommendations for consideration by the FAO COAG Sub-committee on livestock

From the above it is increasingly clear that UN Member States and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) acknowledge the cumulative benefits and role of improving and promoting animal welfare to achieving sustainable livestock transformation. This is in line with many others, including Governments and Private Sector, that are recognising the importance of animal welfare as a component of many other sustainability deliverables. The following recommendations encourage the FAO to explore more deeply how animal welfare can be potentially adopted into existing and new work programs. The FAO Committee on Agriculture (COAG) Sub-committee on livestock is therefore called to consider the following:

Under agenda item: *Sustainable livestock systems for food security, nutrition and inclusive economic growth*

- Call on FAO to explicitly consider the cumulative benefits of improving animal welfare to achieving sustainable livestock transformation in the 'Global assessment of the contribution of livestock to food security, sustainable agrifood systems, nutrition and healthy diets', particularly in the development of components 3 and 4;
- Include the improvement of animal welfare in the priorities and actions of the 'Global Plan of Action for Sustainable Livestock Transformation' that is to be adopted at the ad hoc extraordinary session of the COAG Sub-Committee on Livestock to be convened in October 2025; and
- Call on FAO to strengthen its support for the implementation of UNEA resolution 5/1 on the "animal welfare, environment, and sustainable development nexus".

Under agenda item: *Animal, public and environmental health through the One Health approach*

- Call on the UN General Assembly High Level meeting on antimicrobial resistance (AMR) – to be convened in September 2024 – to recommend to '**Transform agrifood systems to significantly reduce antimicrobial use (AMU) while optimizing animal health and welfare**' as proposed by the AMR Multi-Stakeholder Partnership Platform

Quadripartite (FAO, UNEP, WHO and WOA) in its “*Call for actionable steps in response to the rising threat of antimicrobial resistance (AMR)*”⁸; and

- Call on FAO to explicitly include action to improve animal welfare as a driver to reduce animal and zoonotic diseases and antimicrobial use in the implementation of the Progressive Management Pathway for Terrestrial Animal Biosecurity (PMP-TAB).

Under agenda item: *Natural resource use, climate change and biodiversity*

- Call on FAO to explore the specific role of improving animal health and welfare to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the context of the development of a guidance document on the opportunities for Members to participate in compliant and voluntary carbon markets within the livestock sector under the Paris Agreement;
- Call on FAO to explore how improved animal welfare can contribute to sustainable nitrogen management and a reduction by half of nitrogen waste and pollution as per target 7 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and UNEA resolution 5/2; and
- Call on FAO to explore the specific contribution of improving animal welfare in livestock production to the full integration of biodiversity and its multiple values in national efforts to achieve sustainable livestock transformation and to deliver on target 14 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

Animal welfare and sustainable livestock systems for food security, nutrition, and inclusive economic growth

With UN General Assembly “calls” to strengthen global efforts to ensure that animal health and welfare can contribute to addressing challenges and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals⁹, the prompt for the inclusion of animal welfare into sustainable livestock transformation is evident.

Good animal welfare promotes good human nutrition and food security. Animal management that supports animal welfare is associated with providing nutritional benefits for consumers. Proactive management and care can protect the health and increase longevity of animals, directly improving the food security of their owners and communities that rely on them.

Positive change for livelihoods and economic growth resulting from improved animal welfare are possible for individual animal owners, men and women. Focusing on animal welfare provides opportunities for enhancing the productivity of small-scale livestock producers. Improving quality of inputs, while maintaining important aspects of behavioural freedom and species-appropriate social interactions, create improvements in animal welfare that improve production in small-scale settings.

⁸ Call for actionable steps in response to the rising threat of antimicrobial resistance (AMR), Key recommendations for action on antimicrobial resistance for consideration by UN Member States in the United Nations General Assembly High-Level Meeting on AMR, FAO, 2024, <https://openknowledge.fao.org/bitstreams/f252d9e2-91f2-48d7-a20c-50da25539234/download>

⁹ A/RES/78/168, Agriculture development, food security and nutrition, <https://www.undocs.org/A/RES/78/168>

Good animal welfare contributes to gender equity. Women have key roles in livestock keeping, as they are responsible for handling and caring for these animals, particularly in smallholder systems and in LMICs. Women make essential contributions to animal welfare and can profit from more resilient livestock systems.

Diverse examples of investment in specific approaches that consider animal welfare exist, providing opportunities for economic growth in various sectors.

Animal, public and environmental health through the One Health approach

In UNEA resolution 5/1 on “Animal welfare, environment and sustainable development nexus” Member States identified animal welfare as a key driver to promote the One Health approach¹⁰.

Higher welfare status of animals is also associated with inherently better health, improved resistance to infectious (including zoonotic) disease and a reduced need for medication with anti-infective agents, including antibiotics.

Animal management strategies that benefit the welfare of animals can reduce the need for antimicrobial use. These approaches include preventative veterinary health care, appropriate stocking densities and production systems, and species appropriate keeping, such as social groupings and stockperson care.

Quality animal management, on farm through to post-slaughter, reduces food safety risks and wastage. Good handling and animal care has One Health benefits at points along the production system while the safety of animal-sourced food is improved by good animal welfare practices on farm and during transport and processing.

Natural resource use, climate change and biodiversity

The role of enhancing animal welfare in food systems has been supported by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES): “Feeding the world in a sustainable manner, especially in the context of climate change and population growth, entails food systems that ensure adaptive capacity, minimize environmental impacts, eliminate hunger, and contribute to human health and animal welfare”¹¹.

Good animal health and welfare correlates with reduced greenhouse gas emissions in a wide range of species and production systems. Silvopastoralism, agroecological and pasture-based systems are examples of these and make contributions to biodiversity.

¹⁰ UNEP/EA.5/Res.1, Animal welfare – environment – sustainable development Nexus, <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/39795/ANIMAL%20WELFARE%e2%80%93ENVIRONMENT%e2%80%93SUSTAINABLE%20DEVELOPMENT%20NEXUS.%20English.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

¹¹ The Global Assessment report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services; Summary for Policymakers, IPBES, 2019, https://ipbes.net/sites/default/files/2020-02/ipbes_global_assessment_report_summary_for_policymakers_en.pdf

Welfare-enhancing indoor systems can also contribute to emission reductions. A diverse number of examples exist where welfare-positive systems also have positive benefits for soil and land regeneration.

The diversity in production systems means benefits to welfare, climate, resources and biodiversity differ in direction (positive or negative) and magnitude. Assessments of the environmental impacts of system changes/modifications need to factor in animal welfare.

Summary

Livestock play vital and diverse roles in food systems. There are strong correlations between good animal welfare and sustainable food systems, public and environmental health, and co-benefits for natural resource use, climate change and biodiversity. The benefits and contributions of good animal welfare to food systems would be even greater if there was more focus on animal welfare at multiple levels of food systems assessment and governance.

- Precedent for the formal, meaningful inclusion of animal welfare into the transformation of sustainable livestock systems has been set.
- For transformation to more efficient, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable food systems to occur, animal welfare needs to be integrated into plans for change and the evaluation of alternatives.
- Animal welfare should be included in a meaningful way to as a as a part of developing plans for Sustainable Livestock Transformation approaches

Further details and key findings can be found in the GASL publication **Animal welfare for production and working animals: evidence and need for action**.

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