

# **The relativity of ethical issues in animal agriculture related to different cultures and production conditions**

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## **Abstract**

Ethical issues are increasingly on the agenda in the European public debate not only with reference to novel technologies but also in relation to animal welfare in livestock agriculture. In this context, the main question is the human responsibility towards animals. Initiatives to incorporate European animal welfare standards in international trade agreements emerged recently. However, the adoption of ethical norms by societies with vastly differing socio-cultural background, living conditions and livestock production systems implemented to fit the prevailing ecological circumstances is highly contentious: Ethics and animal welfare considerations are related to issues of relativism. This paper analyzes arguments for the relativism paradigm in exemplary tropical livestock production systems which are characterized by agro-ecology, the extent of human intervention, values and the level of economic/technological development. In the Fulani pastoral system where the impact of agro-ecological conditions is high the scope to adjust the climatic effects on animal and human welfare is low. Further, the magnitude of human intervention, investigated in the Indian smallholder crop-livestock production system, determines the farmer's responsibility for adequate handling of animals and in the modern, highly commercialized animal production farmers have an accountability to invest in animal-friendly technology. Local moralities deserve adequate interest independent of the production system. Therefore, the issue of animal welfare should be regarded relative in the global context and a dialogue between the cultures is encouraged to advance ethics in animal agriculture.

Keywords: ethics, animal agriculture, culture, production system

## ***Introduction***

At present ethical issues increasingly arouse public interest not only in view of the fast progress in novel technologies, such as biotechnology and nanotechnology, but also in relation to animal welfare in livestock agriculture; the most pressing query being the human responsibility towards animals. In Europe intensification and mass production in animal husbandry had detrimental effects. High producing farm animals revealed severe health problems and reduced life spans. Hence, ethical debates arose with respect to the adequacy of intensive animal production in order to sustain the well-being of farm animals.

Animal welfare concerns are expected to become an important question also on a global platform. Impulses in this regard are given by recent European initiatives to incorporate the subject of animal welfare in international trade agreements. However,

the adoption of European ethical norms by societies in other parts of the world is highly controversial due to immensely differing socio-cultural background, living standards and livestock production systems. Until now very little is discussed about own concepts of animal welfare in societies of the southern hemisphere and the fitting of foreign norms into tropical settings.

The objective of this paper therefore is to place ethical issues in animal agriculture in an international context and attempting to develop a dialogue between the cultures.

### ***Characterizing tropical livestock production systems***

Animal production systems in the tropics may differ vastly from those in the temperate zone. Major constraints of livestock husbandry in the tropics are the harsh climate, the resulting seasonal fodder availability and the missing infrastructure. Compared with European animal agriculture, livestock production in less developed countries is more diverse comprising

- extensive pastoral systems,
- semi-intensive smallholder crop-livestock production systems, and
- intensive large-scale commercial systems.

Main determinants of these production systems are agro-ecological conditions in the particular geographical region, the magnitude of human intervention in animal agriculture, value systems and the level of economic/technological development in the respective society (see Figure 1).

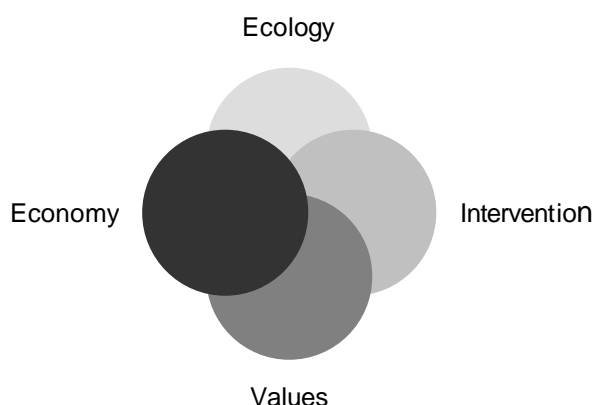


Figure 1: Main determinants of tropical animal production systems

It is argued that the interrelation between the livestock production system and the importance of individual determinants in a given system has an impact on ethical issues related to animal welfare. The extent of interrelation will be exemplarily examined in four case studies:

## ***Ethical concerns in animal agriculture***

### **Agro-ecological conditions and the ethical problem of hunger: the case of the Fulani pastoral system in northern Nigeria**

Agro-ecological conditions are the dominant force in the Fulani livestock production system. Animals are frequently exposed to severe climatic stress caused by high temperatures and intensive solar radiation. An indirect effect of the aversive climate is the scarcity of food and water. Therefore, a major ethic-related problem in the area is the suffering from hunger compelling Fulani pastoralists to drive their herds to distant places to overcome the seasonal availability of food.

However, the harsh environment and scarcity of feeding resources affect animals and humans equally, since the well-being of animals is intricately linked with the well-being of humans. For example, poor feeding and watering in dairy animals resulting in declining milk yields has negative effects on the nutritional status of the pastoral family and additional income from purchasing or bartering milk is lost. On the other hand, financial and technological assistance by development aid to improve human livelihood may benefit animals, because higher disposable income supports better animal management and care (McCrindle 1998).

It seems essential to take the effects of agro-ecological conditions on animals and humans into consideration when ethical issues in tropical animal agriculture are under investigation. The more prominent the impact of nature the lower is the scope to adjust the consequences of harsh environments on animals and human beings. Hence, in resource-poor communities value judgements concerning animal welfare in relation to human welfare are vital.

### **The extent of human intervention in animal agriculture with respect to animal well-being: the case of Indian bullocks in the smallholder production system**

In India livestock farming forms an integral part of a diversified agriculture. Smallholders widely depend upon draught animal power for land preparation and pulling carts and bullocks are highly esteemed for securing livelihood of the farming family. The appreciation is expressed in the ethical concept of the 'sacred cow' which prohibits the slaughtering of cattle. However, despite the traditional reverence of cattle, the ideals are not always followed in modern India (Choudhury, 1994).

Especially the well-being of draught animals is often seriously threatened. Draught animals are subjected to direct human intervention more than any other farm animal in the crop-livestock production system. Overworking is a common problem in bullocks. By crude mistreatment including "beatings, twisting tails or prodding with sharp devices" draught animals are forced to work beyond their physical ability. Ill and injured animals are not always withdrawn from work. Apart from rough handling Indian bullocks may also suffer from inadequate technologies, when pulling agricultural implements and carts (Ramaswamy, 1998). Ill-fitting yokes and harnesses inflict wounds on animals which result in reduced work output (Pearson, 1999).

The extent of human intervention in animals and agricultural settings is an important factor, if the well-being of draught animals is concerned. In accordance, the following

proposition is formulated: the higher the level of intervention, the higher is the farmer's responsibility for adequate handling and housing of their animals.

### **Local moralities concerning the treatment of farm animals: the case of llama breeders in the Andean highland**

Llama breeders on high altitudes in the Andes maintain a value system that symbolically integrates herds, herders, alpine pastoral habitat and supernatural powers (Webster, 1973). In the local ethic llamas are objects of elaborate religious rituals which are chiefly concerned with llama welfare and fertility. However, ritual ceremonies may also involve the sacrificing of llamas. A way of killing animals ritually is to rip out the heart from the camelid's body - a method that is said to prevent the llama from suffering and the person who has killed it from punishment (Gareis, 1982).

These findings indicate that concern for animals is part of religious-philosophical traditions with each of these traditions having its own paradigms and ideas about animals (Waldau, 2002). Accordingly, the treatment of animals is determined by the paradigm or the principle view of the world predominant in a particular culture. Sacrificing llamas is in agreement with the world-view of the Andean inhabitants, but contradicts the European view of things. Western moral philosophy in general claims the universal validity of ethical principles implying that the western way of treating animals is right for everyone, everywhere. However, some philosophers (e.g. Cook, 1999; Des Jardin, 1997) rejected the general validity of western ethics and argued for the view of ethical relativism. This view holds that ethical standards depend upon, or are relative to, an individual's cultural-religious background.

The example of llama breeders in the Andean highland revealed that the human treatment of animals is clearly attributed to the value system of a culture. Owing to the view of ethical relativism, local moralities deserve adequate attention in judging ethical concerns in tropical livestock production.

### **Animal welfare in modern livestock production systems: the case of large-scale commercial poultry and swine production in Thailand**

Starting with the 1960s the dramatic growth of the Thai economy caused the poultry and pig sector to expand rapidly. Commercial development of poultry and pig production was promoted by a few feed mill companies which provided imported breeds, animal feeds, drugs, and farm management expertise to contracted producers (Tisdell et al., 1997). Meanwhile, Thai livestock production has entered the world market; poultry products are exported into the EU. In these modern livestock production systems human intervention and the economic/technological development is significant, while natural effects have minor importance.

Compared with traditional systems, Thai large-scale poultry and pig production is conducive to high productivity. However, new sources of animal suffering have become apparent, namely

1. system related diseases such as metabolic disorders
2. reduced attention for the individual animal in view of large herds and micro-economic pressure

3. detrimental effects for the physical and psychological well-being in confinement, for example, due the impossibility to exercise inherent behavioural patterns

(Rollin, 1995)

As a result, the commercialization of livestock production systems has an impact on ethical issues in animal agriculture. It is argued that increasing intensity and level of commercialization increases the farmer's accountability to invest in animal-friendly technology.

## **Conclusion**

The introduction of European ethical standards in tropical livestock agriculture is critical because

- it ignores existing moral standards in other cultures that constitute the individual and social identity of human-beings in those cultures
- natural conditions widely determine decisions in animal agriculture and animal treatment
- the magnitude of human intervention within the production system and
- the level of economic/technological development has an influence on ethical queries

Therefore, the issue of animal welfare should be considered relative in the global context. A dialogue between the cultures is desirable to initiate local debates and to develop ethics in animal agriculture.

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