Review

Best practice framework for animal welfare certification schemes ☆

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Certification schemes that aim to provide an assurance on animal welfare have been developed in many countries but there is no internationally agreed mechanism for recognising the equivalence of animal welfare schemes. The lack of standardisation is a complication in international trade as the lack of clarity may impede demand for products from animals reared according to specified levels of welfare. An important first step is to define a credible best practice framework for animal welfare certification schemes that could apply in any country. Schemes may aim to provide assurance on minimum levels of welfare or may also aim to promote welfare improvement within their scheme membership. It is proposed here that certification schemes wishing to make animal welfare claims could adopt a scheme level continuous improvement approach, as already used in quality and environmental certification schemes, to promote improvement at a farm level. It is suggested that this can be achieved by using the following four generic principles. Firstly the scheme can operate a management system that coordinates scheme activities which actively promote improvement in animal welfare within participating farms. This management system should include the following generic steps: plan (establish the objectives including desired outcomes, scheme requirements and monitoring processes), do (implement scheme inspection systems and support structures), check (measure and monitor the process and results) and improve (take action to improve performance). Secondly the scheme should develop progressive resources and outcomes requirements that comply with relevant legislation, encourage the provision of opportunities valued by the animals, promote farm level continuous improvement in important welfare outcomes and require innovation not to compromise welfare goals. Thirdly the scheme should target its assessment and support resources on important welfare concerns. Activities should include assessment of relevant welfare requirements and outcomes, promoting interest amongst farmers in their management, ensuring technical advice is available and insisting on remedial action for those farmers with consistent poor outcomes. Finally by taking an evidence-based, participatory and transparent approach the scheme should also embrace external scrutiny and involvement.

Introduction

Certification schemes in several countries have been developed to provide assurances to consumers on animal welfare and other societal concerns (Mench, 2008; Veissier, Butterworth, Bock, & Roe, 2008). The existence of animal welfare schemes implies that animal welfare is a legitimate quality attribute valued by consumers. However, in those markets, where animal welfare is valued, there are often a number of different private standards operating to different inspection, certification or accreditation systems with different information provided to consumers. This inevitably leads to consumer confusion. For example in the UK the UK Farm Animal Welfare Committee (2011) suggested that "Many consumers are motivated about animal welfare but are confused with information that is provided and are thereby frustrated in their choice." The availability of schemes in different countries is likely to vary according to societal interest in animal welfare. It is difficult to

quantify the relative value that citizens in different countries place on animal welfare and other ethical concerns (Thompson *et al.*, 2011). However, it is clear from surveys such as the Eurobarometer (EC, 2005) that citizens in different countries place a different value on animal welfare. This means that approaches used to improve animal welfare in the industrialized countries may not transfer easily to other countries (Fraser, 2008). However, Fraser does also suggest that "voluntary positive labelling" can play a role in the animal welfare requirements of international corporations purchasing livestock products from less industrialised countries.

International standards concerning animal welfare, including transport, slaughter, emergency euthanasia, beef-cattle and broilers, have been produced by the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE, 2013). It has been proposed that these guidelines could be incorporated into "bi- and multilateral agreements, voluntary corporate codes, and transparent labelling of products" (Thiermann & Babcock, 2005). In addition to suggesting that OIE standards should be used as benchmarks, OIE calls for increased "transparency of private standards" (2010). However, the current OIE standards do not provide a framework for defining the welfare standards of livestock products. Whilst an international framework continues to be absent it is difficult for the food industry to trade products with a definable welfare status when different countries use different private certification schemes. In contrast the agreed international frameworks available for the organic sector have facilitated significant international trade in organic products (Raynolds, 2004).

As part of the European Union Strategy for the Protection and Welfare of Animals 2012–2015 "a simplified EU legislative framework for animal welfare" has been proposed (EC, 2012). The European Commission suggested that this framework should consider "transparency and adequacy of information to consumers on animal welfare for their purchase choice". Regulatory frameworks do already exist for organic certification schemes. For some species, such as laying hens, legislation has been introduced that defines the labelling terms for production systems. The standardisation of welfare assessment measures, which enable standardisation of welfare assessment at a farm level, is also likely to be an important component of any consumer information system (Blokhuis, Veissier, Miele, & Jones, 2010). However, there is no current consensus on a common framework for certification schemes wishing to make animal welfare claims to consumers.

The aim of this article is to define a set of best practice principles that would apply to an effective certification scheme that aims to include animal welfare within its scope. This proposed best practice framework is a suggested generic set of principles that could have several applications. Firstly, the principles could be used by schemes to inform the future development of their own characteristics and processes. Secondly, they could be used by policy makers wishing to evaluate the quality of animal welfare claims of schemes. Lastly, if the framework was incorporated into international agreements on product information systems, this could facilitate the trade in products from animals reared according to specified levels of welfare.

A critical component of the proposed framework is that a scheme aims to improve animal welfare amongst its members rather than simply certify compliance with static minimum requirements. This is analogous to sustainability certification schemes where the goal is to change and improve practice rather than to certify existing practice. The ISEAL Alliance (2010), a network of organisations providing sustainability focused standards, has developed a code of practice that "helps standards systems to better understand the sustainability results of their work". The code of practice suggests that the following principles are necessary for an effective scheme: appropriate scope, practical focus, quality, openness (transparency), effective communication, broad participation, learning, improving and institutional capacity. The proposed framework presented here for animal welfare certification schemes has used concepts presented in the ISEAL code of practice. The article has also been informed by the experiences of two established organisations (RSPCA and Soil Association) with certification schemes that have attempted to continually improve the welfare assurance they provide consumers.

Different approaches used by certification schemes

Different approaches may be taken by certification schemes to provide assurance on animal welfare.

Resource-based approach

The approach used by many certification schemes is to define requirements for resources that are considered important to the animal (Mench, 2008). Compliance with such minimum resource requirements, such as stocking density, bedding type and water facilities, has been used by several schemes as part of the qualifying criteria for membership and the use of the relevant scheme's logo on products. In a review for the European Commission (2009), the RSPCA Freedom Food (UK), Label Rouge (France) and Bioland (Germany) schemes were described as exemplar animal welfare schemes using this approach. Different levels of resource requirements are used in the Global Animal Partnership scheme which defines a tiered system of six labelling descriptors ranging from step 1: no crowding, cages or crates to step 5+: animal-centered entire life on the same farm (Duncan, Park, & Malleau, 2012).

Labelling products according to the production system, such as egg labelling (EC, 2008), and the voluntary code of practice produced by the UK pig industry (BPEX, 2011), rely upon definitions of minimum resource requirements. These production systems descriptors include features such as access to an outdoor environment at