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Non-economic incentives to improve animal welfare: positive competition as a driver for change among owners of draught and pack animals in India

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Abstract

Since 2005, owners of draught and pack horses, mules and donkeys in nine districts of Uttar Pradesh, India, have received support from a UK-based charity, the Brooke. One thousand, three hundred and ninety-six village-level groups of owners and carers, responsible for 29,500 animals, were facilitated to develop their own welfare assessment protocols using a participatory learning and action process adapted from recognised good practice in human social development. Each group assessed the welfare of their animals collectively, using findings to generate action plans for improving equine health, husbandry and working practices. Welfare assessments were repeated at 1 to 3 month intervals. Competitiveness between participants to improve their animals' welfare acted as a driver to increase the number of indicators and sensitivity of rating scales, enabling differentiation of small, incremental improvements in order to identify a 'winner' of each welfare assessment. Binary or three-point 'traffic light' (red-amber-green) scales evolved into a range of 5-, 10-, 20-point or continuous scales, then into multi-level and weighted measures to quantify the welfare improvements seen. Efforts to aggregate multi-dimensional indicators into a single 'winning' score led to indices describing welfare at individual animal level ('welfare index') and population level ('village index'). Benefits of owner-driven monitoring include high levels of commitment and strong peer motivation or pressure to take action. Welfare monitoring and action to improve welfare are integrated within a single process carried out by the same people, in contrast to the separation of evaluation and implementation of welfare improvement seen in inspection or accreditation schemes. Challenges include aggregation of results from a variety of protocols for external analysis, reporting or certification.

Keywords: animal welfare, competition, donkey, horse, incentive, working animal