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

Introduction

An estimated 100 million horses, mules and donkeys work in low-income developing countries (FAOSTAT 2009), providing draught and load-carrying power to support the livelihoods of people in some of the world’s poorest communities. The Brooke is a UK charity set up in 1934 to provide veterinary care and husbandry advice to the owners of working animals and Brooke India currently works in 25 districts across five states. In 2005, recognising the need to expand its focus from short-term animal health interventions to a more holistic, long-term view of working equine welfare issues, Brooke India began to adopt participatory and sustainable approaches from the international development sector, combined with evidence from animal welfare science and other disciplines.

Working with people in groups is a recognised alternative to individual encounters for social support and changing behaviour. It is used extensively in international development contexts (Kumar 2002; Kar 2003; Gregson et al 2004) and in health interventions such as smoking cessation, weight loss and self care for chronic conditions (Hoddinott et al 2010). Brooke India’s experienced extension staff facilitated equine owners (mostly men) and carers (usually the wives, children and other relatives of owners) in Uttar Pradesh to work collectively to improve the welfare of their working animals, using a participatory learning and action process adapted from recognised good practice in human social development (described in van Dijk & Pritchard 2010; van Dijk et al 2011). This began as a pilot in 2006 with 40 community groups owning approximately 650 horses, mules and donkeys. It is now incorporated into the organisation’s core strategic approach and by September 2010 it had been used with 1,396 groups owning 29,500 working animals. During this period, field staff observed a spirit of positive competition developing in many communities which acted as a non-economic...