Animal welfare and intergovernmental organisations: the role of intergovernmental organisations such as the OIE in animal welfare

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Abstract

Intergovernmental organisations, formal arrangements between governments of states, nations or countries, have a key role in global affairs, including animal disease control and animal welfare standard setting. They have advantages over countries that act by themselves, for instance their standards can be recognised under international treaties and apply across or outside of normal country boundaries and they can consider impacts at a broader or global scale rather than having to focus only on those occurring in one country. The key intergovernmental organisation that deals with animal welfare is the OIE (the World Organisation for Animal Health). The OIE was established by an international agreement signed in 1924 to deal with the threat of animal disease and now has 178 member countries and territories. From 2001, members agreed to an expanded mandate recognising the importance of animal welfare. It established an Animal Welfare Working Group in 2002 and has since adopted guiding principles for animal welfare, seven animal welfare chapters in its Terrestrial Animal Health Code (Anonymous 2010a) and two animal welfare chapters in its Aquatic Animal Health Standards Code (Anonymous 2010b). The chapters cover the transport of animals by land, sea and air, the slaughter (of terrestrial animals) for food, killing for disease control, the control of stray dog populations, the use of animals in research and education, and the welfare of farmed fish during transport and considerations when slaughtered for food. Animal welfare is a complex issue that crosses cultural, socio-economic, political, religious and scientific boundaries. The OIE recognises this and has developed its guidance and standards in ways that take account of these complexities. The guidance is being applied successfully by its members to improve animal welfare. Five key aspects to the OIE’s approach contribute to this success: i) it has developed underlying, guiding principles for animal welfare; ii) it has clearly explained the concept of animal welfare to suit its own purposes; iii) it allows for flexibility in the implementation and review of guidance and standards to support compliance and ensure they remain current; iv) the guidance and standards are based on science; and v) both the public and private sectors in members’ countries and territories are involved in the development and review of standards, which improves engagement and compliance. The OIE’s guiding principles for animal welfare recognise the link between animal health, food safety, productivity and animal welfare, and the role that animals play in human life. These principles provide an opportunity for considering the ethical framework that is most appropriate for its purpose and its members. Together with an understanding of the needs of the animals, they allow for agreement on a clear statement of what is considered acceptable practice and what is unacceptable. It also means that situations that are not covered by explicit standards are still covered by the general principles. The OIE-agreed explanation of animal welfare, which is crucial to ensure that members are all clear about the intention and desired outcomes of standards, clearly states what animal welfare is and also what it is not. Animal welfare is explained in the Chapter 7.1, Article 7.1.1 of the Terrestrial Animal Health Code as:

Animal welfare means how an animal is coping with the conditions in which it lives. An animal is in a good state of welfare if (as indicated by scientific evidence) it is healthy, comfortable, well nourished, safe, able to express innate behaviour, and if it is not suffering from unpleasant states such as pain, fear, and distress. Good animal welfare requires disease prevention and veterinary treatment, appropriate shelter, management, nutrition,