How best to improve farm animal welfare? Four main approaches viewed from an economic perspective

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Abstract

Looking at the issues from an economic perspective, we examine four approaches to the improvement of farm animal welfare: legislative initiatives, and initiatives driven by producers, consumer choice (labelling), and food companies (Corporate Social Responsibility; CSR). We take as our starting point the assumption that to obtain the best possible improvements in animal welfare, a combination of all four approaches will be needed. The main focus of the paper is to show that (and how) economics and other social sciences can play an important role in determining how to design and implement these approaches most effectively. We argue that insights from animal welfare science on what constitutes an improvement in animal welfare, and how such improvements are best measured, are a necessary input to the economic analyses. Economic analyses can guide the form and extent of welfare legislation so as to set decent minimum standards of animal welfare. To exploit producer-driven animal welfare opportunities, understanding the relationship between animal welfare, productivity and other product or production characteristics is essential. To make best use of initiatives driven by consumer choice and CSR, the focus needs to be on, not simply aspects of animal welfare for which consumers are known to be willing to pay, but also other welfare dimensions viewed as essential by animal welfare experts. Finally, recent, rapid developments in the marketing of animal welfare-friendly products have demonstrated the need for more knowledge about the ways in which consumers perceive the different kinds of information used in labels and CSR strategies.

Keywords: animal welfare, consumers, corporate social responsibility, economics, legislation, stakeholders

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that efficient livestock production requires good management practices which include appropriate feeding and healthcare (Food and Agriculture Organisation [FAO] 2018a). In this respect, it is in the producers’ interests to preserve at least some elements of farm animal welfare, particularly those related to good animal health. However, over the last two decades, numerous studies have shown that many people care about aspects of animal welfare that are not necessarily safeguarded in profitable methods of production (Eurobarometer 2007, 2016; de Jonge & van Trijp 2013a; Christensen et al 2014; Weible et al 2016; Denver et al 2017; Grunert et al 2018). The latest Eurobarometer study (2016), involving 27,672 European citizens in 28 countries, reported that almost all respondents (94%) considered it to be ‘very important or somewhat important’ to protect the welfare of farm animals. Almost as many (82%), answered ‘yes, certainly, or yes, probably’ when asked whether they believed the welfare of farmed animals in their respective countries should be given greater protection than it receives currently.

Concerns about the well-being of farm animals date back more than five decades. Beginning in the 1960s, in countries in north-west Europe, farm animal welfare acquired a political importance it had not had before. The main tool initially devised to protect animal welfare was legislation (Sandøe & Jensen 2013). Animal welfare laws were introduced first at the national level and, later, within the European Union (EU), at the supranational level, binding EU member states (Bennett 1997; Fraser 2008; Christensen et al 2012). Currently, there are common EU rules on the transport and slaughter of livestock, and joint minimum requirements have been defined for the housing of a number of farm animals, including pigs, broilers, laying hens and calves (Broom 2017; European Commission 2017).

However, the interest within the EU in further regulating animal welfare through legislation has waned. This development is connected with increasing pressure from global competition in animal production, and also, it would seem, challenges in reaching international agreements on higher animal welfare standards in a considerably expanded EU (Christensen et al 2012). Policy papers from the EU have begun to stress the potential of market-driven approaches which help consumers to navigate their way to different types of welfare products through information provision, certification and labelling (European Commission 2006, 2009).