The relationship between working horse welfare and their owners’ socio-economic status

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Abstract

The relationship between the socio-economic status of working equine owners and the welfare status of their animals is yet to be documented. The aim of this study was to provide an approach to understanding socio-economic status, quality of life and working aspects of working horse owners, in order to establish their social vulnerability index and to determine how these measures correlate with the welfare state of their horses. Seventy-two owners and their urban working horses (n = 122) were studied. Owners’ socio-economic and educational status was established together with their quality of life perception and multi-dimensional poverty index. The animal welfare index was constructed using animal-based measures. Whilst over 90% of owners were considered vulnerable, only 28.3% of horses were classified as being in a poor welfare state (e.g., presence of lesions and morphology not adequate for draught type). There were no significant correlations between owners’ factors and the animal welfare index. We conclude, therefore, that social vulnerability of owners does not necessarily imply that their animals will be in a poor welfare state.

Keywords: animal welfare, livelihood, poverty, quality of life, socio-economic status, working horse

Introduction

A person’s livelihood comprises their capabilities and their means of living, including food security, income and tangible and intangible assets (Chambers & Conway 1991). Assets are usually considered in five categories: i) human capital (including labour power, health status, skills and knowledge); ii) natural capital (access to land, water, wildlife, flora and forest); iii) financial capital (including savings and access to regular income); iv) physical capital (houses, vehicles, equipment, tools and livestock); and v) social capital (refers to the networks, kin networks or group memberships) (Food and Agriculture Organisation [FAO] 2009). These categories have been used to estimate vulnerability or multi-dimensional poverty indices in human communities (Alkire & Santos 2010, 2011). Working horses could be considered as natural, financial, physical and social capital (Pritchard 2014), being an important component of the livelihood of many families around the world that still depend on them as a means of living. At the same time, the welfare state of working horses can be affected by the livelihood of their owners, since the provision of resources, such as the working practices associated with their work, are essential for the maintenance of their welfare. The link between the welfare state of working horses and the livelihood of their owners has not been studied in detail. Some studies refer to the role and impact that working horses have on livelihoods, mainly looking into the effect on income generation (Chang et al 2010; Mburu et al 2012), with a lack of information on how livelihoods affect the welfare of working horses. Livelihoods could influence animal welfare in different ways, for example, the human capital includes the skills and knowledge of people; in this case, the caretakers of working horses can have a direct effect on animal welfare. The knowledge and technical competence of caretakers plays a major role, since inadequate knowledge may lead to poor decision-making, for example, in husbandry practices (Rushen & de Passillé 2010). This has been observed by Tadich et al (2008), where most of the welfare problems described in urban working horses were found to be due to the owners’ lack of knowledge in relation to feeding and farriery practices. The lack of knowledge can be explained by the high percentage of owners that are illiterate or with incomplete primary school education (Tadich & Stuardo-Escobar 2014). Financial and physical capitals are also important assets when considering the welfare of working horses. This is particularly noteworthy when it’s taken into account that the income of most urban draught horse owners lies below the poverty line, thereby reducing the affordability of some resources necessary for the proper maintenance of horses (Tadich et al