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Could Transparency International Be a Model to Improve Farm Animal Welfare?

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Executive Summary

- ❖ The text discusses the potential for adopting a model akin to [Transparency International](#) to improve farm animal welfare. By relying on standards related to consumers' right to information, this organization could develop and promote standard reporting methods, auditing systems, transparency rankings of companies and governments, and improved labelling and traceability of animal products.
- ❖ Lack of transparency enables companies to circumvent reforms and prevents assessing the true effectiveness of animal welfare policies.
- ❖ Increased transparency would promote accountability, compliance with standards, and enhancement of welfare practices.
- ❖ We propose the creation of a dedicated organization focused on enhancing transparency in animal welfare. An organization focused on transparency could develop reporting frameworks, auditing processes, traceability systems, sourcing policies requiring transparency, and welfare labeling schemes.
- ❖ Increased consumer awareness through transparent labeling, traceability, sourcing policies, and educational campaigns could help bridge the gap between preferences and realities.
- ❖ Transparency initiatives could include public sharing of independent audit results, animal-based health monitoring, stockmanship qualifications, slaughter line inspections, and transparency rankings of companies.

Introduction

In recent years, significant advancements in farm animal welfare have been achieved through the concerted efforts of numerous organizations and individuals. These efforts have encompassed a wide range of interventions, including the improvement of housing systems, breeding practices, bans of particularly harmful procedures, and the development of new animal welfare legislation and standards.

Despite these achievements, the path to securing a good life for farmed animals remains a long one. There is not only a need for additional reforms and their expansion into multiple geographies, but also for the assurance of their effectiveness in promoting animal welfare. Here we argue that the creation of mechanisms for increased transparency in the production chain is critical in this regard.

Not uncommonly, producing companies find ways to circumvent reforms or exploit loopholes in enforcement, as evidenced by widespread violations of animal welfare legislation in the European Union (examples are available [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). Even when enforcement is effective, compliance with specific requirements may not necessarily translate into tangible welfare improvements. For example, abolishing practices leading to physical alterations such as tail docking in pigs or beak trimming in laying hens – band-aid solutions to the issues of tail biting and injurious pecking, respectively – may lead to poorer welfare if other management and housing measures are not simultaneously implemented to reduce the stress that triggers those behaviors. Similar issues may arise with the removal of antibiotics from the supply chain or changes in housing conditions without simultaneous adjustments in other practices.

A promising approach in this context is a focus on the monitoring and report of meaningful welfare outcomes. It is at the animal level that the effectiveness of welfare policies should work, hence where monitoring is most needed. For example, setting maximum thresholds for outcomes such as the prevalence of diseases, fractures, and other injuries, as inspected at the slaughter line by independent auditors, would leave less room for evading welfare advancements.

This approach, however, depends on companies having transparency about their operations. Transparency is fundamental in ensuring that practices align with actual welfare outcomes. Transparency is also crucial to bridge the gap between consumer preferences for ethically produced animal products and the reality of industrial agricultural practices. For example, the absence of clear labeling on animal products

frequently leads to consumer confusion, hindering choices that are consistent with ethical values.

The imperative for increased transparency in animal welfare practices mirrors the foundational principles of organizations like [Transparency International](#). Since its establishment, Transparency International has been globally recognized in the fight against corruption by using a strategic approach to making corruption more visible and difficult to conceal, setting a precedent for how sector-specific transparency organizations can drive systemic change. Similarly, adopting a model inspired by Transparency International in the realm of animal welfare could be transformative, increasing the efficacy of existing and future welfare initiatives. By fostering accountability and shining a light on the actual conditions and treatment of animals within the production chain, increased transparency – or at least pressure towards it – could promote adherence to standards and encourage the ongoing enhancement of welfare practices by subjecting companies to independent audits and public oversight.

The establishment of an organization dedicated to enhancing transparency in farm animal welfare could significantly benefit from leveraging existing standards related to consumers' right to information. Numerous international frameworks and guidelines establish principles for non-misleading consumer information. These standards could serve as a basis for developing standard reporting practices, auditing mechanisms, transparency indexes, [transparent labeling schemes](#) and improved traceability within the livestock industry.

The call for increased transparency in animal welfare practices also poses a challenge for the industry to openly oppose; opposing transparency could inadvertently imply that there are aspects of their operations that would not withstand public scrutiny.

Potential Areas of Work

The proposed areas of work below are initial ideas meant to initiate a discussion on increasing transparency in animal production. These suggestions are not exhaustive or detailed but are intended to encourage further exploration and development of strategies in this area.

Creation of a Transparency Index to rank companies by their commitment to transparency in the production chain. Such an index could be used in sourcing policies, investment portfolios (to reduce image risks), and other areas. It could

include reports on (1) the company's policy for unannounced animal welfare audits by accredited and independent third parties; (2) the number of annual assessments of animal-based indicators of welfare conducted by independent third parties at the farm and abattoir levels, and any direct or indirect association of inspectors with the company; (3) the methods for the choice of the facilities inspected, their representativeness within production chain, the proportion of animals assessed within each facility inspected, and the proportion of facilities inspected; (4) whether outcomes of audits are publicly available and include all indicators assessed, (5) the existence and coverage of video monitoring systems (farms, culling areas, transport and abattoirs), including access for inspection by independent auditors.

Development of Standard Reporting Practices and Auditing Mechanisms: development of uniform reporting frameworks for key animal welfare indicators, enabling consistent data collection and benchmarking across producers and regions, and the establishment of independent auditing processes to evaluate compliance with animal welfare standards.

Stockmanship Transparency: creation of initiatives or mechanisms to disclose stockmanship ratios and qualifications, providing insights into what is typically a limiting factor to ensure animal welfare.

Transparent Labeling: develop and support initiatives for clear, standardized labeling on animal products that provide consumers with transparent information about welfare conditions.

Improved Traceability: develop mechanisms for improved traceability of animal products.

Transparent Sourcing Policies: Encourage retailers and food companies to adopt transparent sourcing policies that clearly outline their standards for animal welfare and their compliance mechanisms.

Legislative Advocacy: Advocacy for laws mandating transparency in animal welfare, including the public sharing of welfare outcomes and audit results.

Independent Welfare Monitoring at the Slaughter line: regular monitoring of key health outcomes is already a standard practice for food safety purposes. This existing framework could be co-opted and expanded to include the collection of key parameters related to animal welfare. This approach has been previously advocated by [Temple Grandin](#).

Educational Campaigns: design campaigns using relatable and easily understandable metrics of animal welfare to enhance public awareness. For instance, conveying the "time in pain" that animals endure during the production of certain products, or presenting hard data on the incidence of various welfare issues within the production chain, could make the abstract concept of animal welfare more tangible for consumers.

Digital Transparency Tools: Leverage digital platforms and tools to provide consumers with accessible, detailed information about the welfare standards of products, potentially including QR codes or apps linked to detailed welfare information.