

## **Animal welfare and intergovernmental organisations: the role of inter-governmental 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,

humane handling and humane slaughter/killing. Animal welfare refers to the state of the animal; the treatment that an animal receives is covered by other terms such as animal care, animal husbandry, and humane treatment.

The OIE process allows for flexibility in two main ways. It aims to develop animal welfare guidelines and standards that describe the animal welfare outcome to be achieved, leaving members free to determine the best way for them to meet the requirements. In addition, the standards are not fixed over time but are regularly updated and can therefore take account of changing views as well as advances in science, technology and best practice.

Animal welfare regulations or agreements must be science-based to ensure that they achieve the intended animal welfare benefits. While science cannot answer all questions (including what is or is not acceptable), it can provide information as common ground for objective deliberation on animal welfare issues by diverse stakeholders. The OIE has several successful means of drawing upon scientific expertise in the development of standards. It benefits from expertise during drafting by *ad hoc* groups, and more broadly, from three international animal welfare science 'Collaborating Centres' that it can turn to for specialist advice. It further draws upon relationships with outside organisations by means of memoranda of understanding or agreements to correspond. The OIE has not formally considered the role of risk assessment in the development or implementation of its animal welfare standards. However, this approach is common in managing animal health and public health risks and could be applied in the development of standards, and by members, individually or regionally, to determine when and how to apply standards.

The OIE develops its animal welfare guidelines and standards by a democratic, open process that allows for expert and member input prior to them being considered for adoption by members at the World Assembly of Delegates in May each year. This provision for member input is the fifth key strength of the OIE's standards development process. Member countries and territories provide experts to *ad hoc* groups that draft the standards, and are then given further opportunities to comment on draft standards at different stages of adoption. This approach allows for the development of standards that suit the cultural, socio-economic, ethical and religious expectations of members

and that fit within their technological limitations. It recognises that animal welfare advances will not be made if standards cannot (or will not) be implemented. Adoption by members is facilitated if the benefits for them and for animal welfare are direct and clear.

The OIE has also run several conferences and workshops to assist members to understand and apply the standards. These provide additional benefits by supporting local veterinary expertise and capacity in the areas of food safety and improved animal productivity. The role and engagement of members is taken a further step through the development of Regional Animal Welfare Strategies, which can provide local support for further actions to help members apply the standards. The Regional Animal Welfare Strategy for Asia, the Far East and Oceania is an example of this ([www.daff.gov.au/animal-plant-health/welfare/regional\\_animal\\_welfare\\_strategy\\_for\\_asia\\_the\\_far\\_east\\_and\\_oceania](http://www.daff.gov.au/animal-plant-health/welfare/regional_animal_welfare_strategy_for_asia_the_far_east_and_oceania)). The OIE approach emphasises the importance of applying modern animal welfare science approaches to our treatment of all animals and could be relevant to whales.

In summary, the OIE has developed animal welfare guidelines and standards that are being successfully applied by diverse member countries and territories. Organisations involved in developing animal welfare standards for any situation can take lessons from its approach. There needs to be an agreed definition of animal welfare, central guiding principles based on the chosen ethical approach, a risk-based, science-based process for developing standards that can be reviewed as often as required, and members need to be involved in the development of standards and local support provided in order to encourage engagement, adoption and compliance.

## References

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