



Editorial

Farm Animal Welfare: A Sri Lankan Perspective

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Farm animal welfare has become a main concern in global livestock production, often shaped by standards and expectations developed in high-income countries. Even though these standards are very important from both moral and scientific perspectives, they are impractical to be directly implemented in the economic setup of developing nations like Sri Lanka. Livestock production in Sri Lanka is predominantly smallholder-based, resource-limited, and closely integrated with rural livelihoods, food security, and cultural practices. Hence, welfare concerns frequently arise from structural constraints such as limited access to capital, quality feed, housing, veterinary services, and climate-resilient infrastructure rather than from deliberate neglect. This editorial examines animal welfare in Sri Lanka through balancing idealism with practicality. Evidence from local production systems suggests that low-cost interventions, including improved housing design, better hygiene, adequate water provision, timely disease prevention, and humane handling, can substantially enhance both animal well-being and productivity. Such measures are often more feasible and impactful than the immediate adoption of resource-intensive welfare standards.

Content

Animal welfare in farm animals has recently become a widely discussed issue in global agriculture, trade, food systems, and ethics. International organisations, consumer groups, and policies recognise the need to raise farm animals in environments that ensure their good health, comfort, and normal behaviours. Although these discussions are very necessary and context-specific, their relevance and requirements differ greatly across different regions. Situations in Sri Lanka require the interpretation of animal welfare in farm animals in the context of culture, production systems, and existing realities.

The early discussion on farm animal welfare emerged in high-income countries in 1950's with the expansion of the high-intensified factory farming system. Since then, different philosophers, organizations, and researchers proposed different concepts regarding farm animal welfare, considering different aspects, including mental health, physical well-being and the appropriate natural behaviours. However, among the different interpretations of animal welfare, the most-commonly accepted definition is the physical and mental state of an animal in relation to the conditions in which it lives and dies. Accordingly, good animal welfare is based on the principle that an animal should be treated in a way that meets its biological, behavioural, and emotional needs, giving the animal a good quality of life. However, more often, people perceive that animal welfare means just the absence of physical suffering of the animal. Even some societies do not fully take hold of the fundamental fact that animals do have physical and mental needs, and they can experience pain during many procedures involved in livestock management. Unfortunately, under the local context, no scientific data on the consumer and producer's perception and understanding of the concept of farm animal welfare. Hence, conceptually, the disparities are prominent and should be taken into account when adopting the welfare standards into the local context.

Furthermore, livestock production in Sri Lanka is largely characterized by small-scale, extensive and mixed farming systems. Cattle, buffalo, swine, goats, and backyard poultry contribute to household nutrition, income generation, draft power, and risk management, especially in rural and peri-urban areas. Unlike large industrial systems, Sri Lankan farmers often manage a small number of animals with limited land, capital, and access to modern infrastructure. As a result, animal welfare challenges frequently arise from structural constraints rather than deliberate mistreatment. In general, extensive livestock production systems are often perceived as more welfare-friendly, as they allow animals greater freedom of movement and more opportunities to express natural behaviours. However, under the extensive system, animals are often subjected to prolonged hunger and thirst, heat stress, parasites, predators and poor health monitoring.

Further, Sri Lankan culture plays a significant role in shaping attitudes toward animals. Religious and traditional features emphasise compassion, non-violence, and respect for living beings. These values are reflected in many farming communities where animals are viewed not only as productive assets but also as part of the family. Practices such as caring for aged cattle, reluctance to rear animals for meat purposes and avoiding unnecessary harm illustrate this cultural foundation. However, cultural respect alone does not guarantee good welfare practices, especially when farmers face feed shortages, disease pressure, climate stress, or weak veterinary support.

From a policy perspective, Sri Lanka has made progress toward modernizing its animal welfare standards, though implementation remains inconsistent due to a reliance on outdated legislation. The Department of Animal Production and Health remains the technical lead for animal health and disease control; however, its mandate is often extended between industrial production and welfare enforcement. Although a comprehensive Animal Welfare Bill was proposed as far back as 2006 to address these gaps, it has faced nearly two decades of legislative delays. Consequently, while the Bill promises a transition toward a more ethical framework, the country still lacks the species-specific guidelines and the centralized authority needed for legal enforcement. Furthermore, the livestock production systems, such as broiler and layer rearing, have intensified over the last few decades, to high input system that are similar to those in the developed countries; however, there are no legal frameworks to ensure the welfare issues arising from those systems as well.

One of the key challenges is the mismatch between global welfare standards and local adaptability. Welfare frameworks developed in high-income countries often assume access to advanced housing, automation, climate control, and continuous veterinary supervision. Applying such standards rigidly in Sri Lanka risks excluding smallholder farmers and may create resistance rather than improvement. Instead, welfare assessment and intervention should focus on animal-based indicators such as health status, injury, body condition, behaviour, and stress levels rather than resource-based or management-based indicators. Animal-based indicators provide meaningful insights into welfare outcomes without requiring high-cost investments.

Importantly, improving animal welfare does not necessarily require major structural changes. It is evident that simple, low-cost interventions such as optimal orientation and ventilation of pens, provision of free access to clean drinking water, access to shade structures or trees, maintaining hygienic conditions, timely vaccination, parasite control, and humane handling can significantly

improve both animal well-being and productivity. When the farmer recognises a clear welfare-income or production linkage, there will be a better possibility for adoption.

Education and capacity building are equally important for the enhancement of farm animal welfare. Educational institutions and relevant training institutes must integrate context-specific welfare concepts into livestock curricula. Extension services should also frame animal welfare as part of good farm management rather than as an external ethical obligation. At the same time, research should be focused on finding local evidence on welfare-friendly practices suited to Sri Lanka's climate, production systems, and socio-economic conditions.

Looking ahead, farm animal welfare in Sri Lanka should be positioned as an integral component of sustainable livestock development. Policy frameworks must move beyond compliance-based approaches toward supportive, incentive-driven strategies that empower farmers. Aligning national policies with international guidelines, while adapting them to local realities, will be crucial. Equally important is ensuring that welfare improvements do not undermine food security, farmer livelihoods, or rural resilience.

In conclusion, advancing farm animal welfare in Sri Lanka is not about choosing between ethics and economics, or tradition and modernity. It is about finding a balanced, science-based pathway that respects cultural values, supports farmers, and improves animal well-being in practical and measurable ways. When adapting the welfare ideals in local realities, Sri Lanka can progress toward livestock systems that are productive, humane, and socially acceptable.