Ethical Concerns in LowInputBreeds

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WP 5.2

Introduction

This paper is first part of a review of ethical concerns in LowInputBreeds. In this part, the overall context for raising ethical concerns for breeding for low input animal production and assessing these concerns is characterized. Low input animal production is different from conventional production in several important ways. This means that it faces a partly different array of ethical challenges, but also that the background for ethical assessment in many ways is different.

After the symposion, the major ethical challenges for Low Input Breeding identified during the workshops will be described in some detail, and the available courses of action will be sketched. Finally, a review on the ethical literature on these issues will be added.

What is Ethical Impact Assessment?

An ethical assessment of a practice, such as an instance of low input animal production, is concerned with, firstly, an evaluation on the impact of the practice on all affected parties, as compared with the impact of available alternatives; and secondly, whether the practice involves actions that could be considered wrong in themselves. In the present context, I shall not attempt a clear definition of 'low input' but rather leave it to intuition how to demarcate it from other production systems.

As for the evaluation of impact, it makes a clear difference, which alternative the practice is compared with. Comparing the impact of low input animal production with conventional production is one thing; comparing it with no animal production is another. However, ethical impact assessment is normally conceived as a maximizing exercise, i.e. we should search for the practice with the best overall consequences. This implies also an answer to the question of what the volume of the practice should be; i.e. how animal production should be composed, and how large scale each component should have.

In order to perform an impact assessment, more precise evaluation criteria have to be defined: what exactly make up good or bad impacts. However, there is disagreement about such criteria. For instance, does animal welfare consist in the greatest balance of pleasurable states over painful states? Or does it consist in living a natural life? If such disagreements exist, they should be identified. But even given a set of criteria, there will often be uncertainty about the detailed consequences of a practice, and this will of course affect the evaluation.

Actions that might be considered wrong in themselves can be violations of rights or (more controversial) violations of the integrity of organisms or nature. Is e.g. genetic modification wrong, because it violates the integrity of organisms or goes against 'nature'? Promise breaking might clearly be a relevant wrong in our context in the case where producers do not live up to their own stated standards. However, again there is not

necessarily agreement about what should be considered wrong in itself; and again, if there are disagreements, they should be identified.

It clearly belongs to an ethical impact assessment to consider how the flow of energy and matter through a farm affects the environment and the further consequences this may have. Such further consequences may affect future generations, but they may also have affect wildlife and its biodiversity, which may be a concern in its own right. Belonging to these issues are questions about the scale of production: how much meat and dairy products should be produced worldwide, and how should the production be distributed? What should be the role of low input production on a global scale?

However, for the purposes of this paper, I shall largely leave these questions aside, because in LIB they have been located in WP5.1. There will be a presentation from WP5.1 on the use of resources alongside some invited talks on related issues. I shall therefore concentrate on the more direct impact on humans and animals.

A Hierarchy of Ethical Decisions Concerning Animals

Animal production is a practice characterized by using animals for the benefits of humans. Hence, it is based on a positive answer to the most fundamental question of animal ethics: Is it justifiable to use animals for human purposes, i.e. raise them solely for this purpose and, in an early age, either kill them for their meat or dispose of them, when they have served their purpose? There is a long practice for using animals, and it is widely accepted in most societies. However, there is also a minority of ethically motivated vegetarians in most societies, and use of animals is increasingly under pressure for justification.

Given that the practice of using animal is considered acceptable, the main ethical problems concerning animals are: to which purposes, and under which conditions can they be used? The purpose of producing food is probably among the most widely accepted purposes. However, as other uses, this involves a conflict of interests between humans and animals. Up to a certain point, good conditions for the animals also serve the human interest in production; but then increased productivity often involves higher pressure on the animals with impaired welfare as a consequence. Also low input animal production, although it in many ways is less intensive than conventional production, faces the challenge of striking the right balance between human interests and animal welfare.

Value-Based Choice of Production Form

Low input animal production is typically based on specific values, ideas or conceptions that inform the production. A clear example is organic production which is based on a range of ethical principles summarized some year ago by IFOAM. It is implied by these principles that organic production should be locally rooted and preferably be based on local cycles of nutrients and energy. Other forms of low input animal production are not organic, but still based on local traditions which again involve specific principles of production. By contrast, conventional production is not rooted or committed to special values; in principle, it can produce anywhere and buy its input and sell its output on the world market.

The values underlying low input animal production systems thus make up their identity, which often find a clear expression in a brand. These production systems are easy recognizable by the consumers as an alternative to conventional production, and in many cases the products can be sold with a price premium.

These basic characteristics of low input animal production has many consequences for the impact of the production and also for which actions that are available to address ethical problems. On the general level, it

means that the basic ethical issue of striking a balance between animal and human interests presents itself rather differently for low input animal production than for conventional production. In the following, some of the important differences will be outlined.

Outdoor Animals

It is almost a defining characteristic of low input animal production that the animals are allowed freedom of movement, and much of the time they are kept outdoors or at least given access to outdoor areas. Very few people would deny that, compared with much high-input animal production, this is huge advantage for the animals in terms of welfare. However, the weight of this advantage of course depends on the exact point of comparison, and it is also to some extent debated.

However, to allow the animals this freedom also involves a cost in terms of problems that can be avoided or at least far better controlled by keeping the animal indoors and restricting their movements. The animals may be aggressive against each other. Outdoors, the animals are far more exposed to pathogens and parasites and perhaps even predators; and they may be exposed to more extreme weather conditions. And clearly, it is more difficult to inspect and control the animals. In some cases, the overall consequence is higher mortality rates than those found in indoor systems.

Apart from the negative impact on animal welfare, these problems often also involve losses for the producers. It is therefore a major challenge for low input animal production to address these problems, and addressing them is in many ways the principal task of LIB. The challenge of striking the right balance between the interests of humans and animals remains, but because of the different conditions for the animals, the balance consists of different components.

Values Restrict the Set of Feasible Solutions

Another consequence of the value based choices underlying low input production systems is restrictions on the set of feasible actions. High input conventional production does in principle not exclude itself from any available technology, strategy or practice. But through its fundamental choices, low input production not only commits itself to certain practices which define its identity (like keeping animals outside or abstaining from pesticides and fertilizers); from this identity also follows further restrictions in dealing with the problems, as outlined above, following from the fundamental choices.

For instance, the organic principles put severe restrictions on the use of medicine, and also largely prohibit mutilations like dehorning, beak trimming, tail docking etc. Such restrictions pose an extra challenge in addressing the problems from allowing free movement and outdoor access, like exposure to parasites or aggressions among the animals. Another example is low input production which commits its identity to specific breeds; clearly, cross breeding is not as feasible option for these production systems. Also the organic principles put restrictions on the feasible breeding methods and breeding goals. Overall, low input animal productions systems are concerned with the diversity of breeds, whereas this concern presumably has far less weight in high input production.

A major task for LIB is breeding research for the sake of the special needs of low input animal production. Apart from the general ethical issue of how breeding solutions will affect the balance between the interests of humans and animals, another important issue for LIB is to clarify the precise nature of the value based restrictions on feasible practices.

Higher Expectations

Because low input animal production systems identify themselves by their own value based choice of standards, they also raise higher expectations among consumers, not least among the more dedicated and loyal segments who buy the largest share of the products. This again makes low input production more vulnerable in case of problems than high input conventional production systems to which expectations generally are quite low.

One consequences is that addressing the problems of animal welfare that are specific for low input production is a matter of some urgency, because there will be an expectation among consumers that problems should be addressed. There is a clear perception of this expectation in the LIB project description. However, there is room for debate – and probably disagreement – about which solutions that are compatible with the basic values of the different production systems.

Another consequence is that practices which to a large extent are shared with high input production, e.g. the handling of male animals, may pose a greater challenge for low input production because of the higher expectations. For instance, the destruction of day old male chicks within layers is a practice which is common for both organic and conventional egg production. (Technically, I believe the chickens first become organic at a later stage, but this technicality is without any ethical significance). But whereas conventional production generally is expected to choose the most cost efficient practices, it clearly makes sense to ask, whether this practice really is compatible with the organic principles.

Conclusion

The ethical impact assessment is a matter of, firstly, identifying 'concerns', i.e. the issues that enter into the balancing of human and animal interests; and, secondly, to assess how the balance is affected through different alternative actions. Because of the value based choices that define low input animal production systems, the balance between human and animal interests involve other components and take a different form compared with high input conventional production.

The actions under assessment are the research strategies of LIB. One question is thus how these strategies affect the balance of interests between humans and animals. Another question is how they relate to the basic values of the relevant production system, and how other stakeholders perceive this issue.

We cannot expect clear cut answers to these questions, derived from a few widely shared value premises. But we can identify concerns as they are perceived by LIB researcher and other stakeholders. And through dialogue, we can identify the most important lines of argument concerning the assessment of actions. These results will comprise the take-home message for LIB.