

Organic concepts for animal health and welfare

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Introduction

Organic livestock farming involves a strong principle of high food quality and good animal health and welfare. The emphasis of animal health promotion, disease prevention and support of the natural behaviour and the natural lives of the animals is strong. Organic livestock farming places strong emphasis on conditions that allow animals to exhibit behavioural needs. This involves the provision of a natural environment, and in particular outdoor conditions and a reliance on natural forages. This creates a clear distinction between conventional and organic herds. Such environments also allow animals to be effectively integrated into crop production. At the same time, the human care giving is very important in order to prohibit any suffering or negative effects of the systems in which the animals live. This presentation highlights these issues and give examples in terms of some of the existing challenges for animal health management on a North-Western European, as well as an EU and a global level will be shortly given and in order to discuss some of the specific areas concerning animal health and welfare promotion in organic livestock farming.

Organic livestock farming and naturalness

The concept of naturalness underpins the special philosophy of organic livestock farming. This includes the idea that farm animals should live in an environment corresponding to that which they are adapted to through evolution, and that they should be allowed to perform species-specific behaviour and be fed according to their physiological needs. Contact with ‘nature’ may add certain favourable qualities to the life of an animal, and these qualities are not always measurable and include space, fresh air, light, social contact, experiences of changing weather conditions, unrestricted food (under optimal conditions) and opportunities to interact with a stimulating environment, where the stimuli are meaningful both for the young and the adult animals. Clearly, e.g. the group life and the outdoor access can be linked to some risks for the animal’s life and health, such as parasites or other diseases which are impossible to eradicate from the soil etc.

Human care giving: intervening when necessary and giving a framework in which the natural needs of the animals can be met

The role of the humans becomes particularly important in organic farming, where management should be based on understanding of animal behaviour and where preventive health care is vital. ‘Nature’ does not guarantee the absence of pain, frustration, and discomfort, and animal welfare is not ensured. ‘Care’ is understood as the counterpart of naturalness, expressing humans’ special responsibility towards domestic animals (Alroe et al., 2001). So, human care in relation to ensuring good animal welfare in organic systems can be understood as at least two elements: the careful observation and immediate reaction to situations which could potentially result in decreased animal welfare, and secondly, giving the animals a framework in which their natural needs can be met. So, an organic farmer’s primary duty towards the animals is – on one hand - to support the possibilities for the animals to perform their specie-specific natural behaviour and give them as many opportunities as possible to live a ‘natural life’ (e.g. flock life, outdoor access and with possibilities for mother-offspring relations), and – at the other hand – to be care givers, who support their wellbeing by fulfilling their nutritional requirements and who intervene whenever necessary to avoid a potential crisis. This means that a part of the human care giving is the understanding of the behaviour of animals and – based on this understanding – building up an environment which meets the natural needs of animals. If naturalness is taken seriously, management will be based on insights into

animal behaviour, would involve more consideration of the animal as a part of a herd and would offer greater provision of a natural environment.

Combining naturalness and human care giving into organic farming system thinking

Since the overall goal in organic farming is to create sustainable systems, this philosophical framework of combining naturalness and human care giving gives a lot of challenges in the different contexts of animal husbandry and livestock production in the different regions of the world. Several dilemmas exist, particularly in relation to integrating naturalness into the systems of production as well as the other animal health, economic and environmental objectives of organic farming. Seen from a whole system point of view, integration of more than one livestock species and of livestock with cropping can be an appropriate basis of a balanced and sustainable farming system, allowing nutrient recycling and effective resource use. The organic requirement to provide animals with roughage and give them access to grass helps to mitigate some problems related to foraging behaviour, but a challenge remains for production systems to use animal behaviour as an asset, and ensure that natural behaviour is possible and at the same time the whole system works and it is done as an integrated part of the whole organic system. However, some conflicts are difficult to avoid and care must be taken to solve these in a constructive way, still including the animal welfare objectives.

Challenges for the organic concepts of animal health and welfare on a global level

Many different livestock systems exist globally, e.g. pastoralist, agro-pastoralist, and various crop-livestock systems including transhumance and nomadic systems. The combination of naturalness and human care giving can be applied in very many different ways in practice. Many livestock systems e.g. pastoral and other systems in tropical countries seems to fulfil the criteria of 'naturalness' and many systems can be characterised as 'organic by default'. Most certified organic systems in the Global South may include livestock, but little focus is normally put on organic animals and the special needs of animals as sentient beings. Besides, markets for organic animal products only exist in very few places in many countries throughout the world. Many arguments for supporting and promoting a large-scale conversion of Africa and elsewhere to organic farming is to ensure a sustainable farming method in regions which are environmentally and climatically vulnerable, and this also calls for a profound and context based analysis of possibilities for disease handling and health promotion under minimum use of chemical and veterinary medical products. In the tropical regions the risk of infectious and epidemic diseases are of great concern, and real challenges in terms of disease control exist, since risks are connected with endemic diseases, large flocks / herds and the use of land areas under the given conditions. Other factors related to the economic, political, environmental, climatic and cultural settings also influence both the risks and the possibilities for handling the disease problems. In some of the livestock systems, it seems difficult to convert them into organic farming. There are for instance zero-grazing systems, which do not fulfil naturalness criteria, or farmers often use breeds, which are not resistant to diseases, nor well suited for outdoor life, and which are often dependent on veterinary medicine. One of the future sustainable methods in the organic systems is the use of indigenous breeds, which have adapted to the environmental and disease conditions in which they are living.

Conclusion

The basic organic principles support the inclusion of concepts of naturalness and human care giving as specific concepts for the development of animal health and welfare in organic livestock systems. These concepts can be practiced as part of a sustainable farming system development of organic livestock systems. However, many challenges exist both in terms of dilemmas between different aspects of the farms, as well as challenges related to certain regional and local conditions including climatic, human and other resources.