Not just any plan

Dr Mette Vaarst explains how, through a practical and integrated approach, ANIPLAN sets out to inspire organic farmers to go beyond minimum requirements

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Can you explain the main objectives of the ANIPLAN project?

The main objective of ANIPLAN was to design a framework for farmers to systematically plan improvements in the conditions for their dairy herd and, through this, improve health and minimise the need for disease treatments, including antibiotics. We did this by fulfilling three intermediate objectives.

Firstly, we aimed to develop a set of principles for animal health and welfare planning, to be used under diverse conditions. We also aimed to develop ways to apply animal health and welfare assessments based on results of another European project – Welfare Quality® – for cows. The Norwegian partners developed a protocol for calves around various sources of inspiration. Finally, we seek to establish guidelines for communication about animal health and welfare promotion in different settings, either in dialogue between farmer and one advisor, consultant, veterinarian or facilitator, or in farmer groups following reciprocal advice.

Why are organic principles and regulations not always well implemented in organic herds?

Usually, we hope regulations are quite well implemented, and ensured through certification inspections. The principles are more challenging, because implementing them means going far beyond just living up to the regulations which you can inspect. For example, it is about creating conditions for the animals that allow them to perform natural behaviour, which requires knowledge and skills to organise. A number of organic farmers are engaged in the business because they were attracted to premium prices, subsidies (in some countries), and sometimes the idea that organic farming is more 'future orientated'. When converting to organic farming, they are confronted with a number of regulations, and it takes time before they can go further and become innovative. Also, much of the organic advice and literature focuses more on other enterprises in the farm than the animal herd, making it difficult to find support in developing practices. Lastly, many conventional animal health professionals such as veterinarians often lack sufficient knowledge about organic principles, and sometimes even the regulations governing them.

What strategies are you employing to investigate active, well-planned animal health and welfare promotion, and disease prevention as a means of minimising medicine use?

We have investigated what happened in herds through animal welfare assessments, which were repeated at the beginning and end of the one-year observation period, including data on disease treatments in the herds. Each country participant has followed up implementations with farms and farmers. The project coordinator interviewed those involved in the planning process, to hear how it had been according to those who had facilitated it, including challenges and surprises encountered. So, we have applied both quantitative/epidemiological research methods, animal welfare assessment with focus on animal-based parameters, and qualitative semi-structured interviews of advisors and facilitators, as well as interviews based on key questions to the farmers.

What do you hope to achieve by developing guidelines for communication about animal health and welfare promotion in different settings?

We hope advisors, facilitators and other animal health and welfare professionals, as well as the farmers themselves, acquire sufficient skills to approach a planning process in a way that leads to implementation and improvement – not just written words in a document. All project participants have experience of paperwork, but these do not necessarily reflect a farmer's commitments or decisions, and therefore do not lead to action. When communication is performed in ways which stimulate the farmers' own thinking and motivates them, there is hope for action and interaction.

How would you measure your success, and to what extent have you achieved the initial objectives set out at the start of the project?

We have shown a number of ways to carry through a conscious and 'well-thought-through' planning process. We are able to describe how this process can be carried out in practice under different conditions; we have investigated how the assessment can be best used by farmers, and how planning improvements in the herd could actually lead to a reduction of disease and antibiotics use. All of the results are shown through examples in practice and active participation of end users, and that, in our view, is quite a convincing scale of measuring success. Again, we must emphasise that the very limited time weakens the outcome, because more challenges are likely to appear in a continuous process; there are still a number of question marks – things that should be improved, based on experiences from the first years of a process in farming environments.

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Herding for success

Through better planning and communication, **ANIPLAN** aims to improve the health and welfare of farm animals substantially so the need for disease treatments is minimised, although medicine use is allowed in all types of European cattle farming, including organic production

IN DAIRY FARMING, the 'organic' label indicates more natural and animal welfare friendly surroundings, as well as more environmentally favourable ones. For many organic farmers, ensuring high levels of animal health and welfare (AHW) is a top priority, through breeding, feeding, housing and species-tailored husbandry. Minimising veterinary interventions through better animal health and welfare in their herd is a priority, in terms of quality products and lessening environmental impact.

The European CORE-Organic project 'Minimising medicine use in organic dairy herds through animal health and welfare planning' (ANIPLAN) aims to work with farmers to ensure improved food quality and minimised risk for antibiotic resistance through non-medical means. EU regulations on organic production place the values of 'positive health and welfare' at its core: naturalness, harmony through the production process, use and recirculation of local resources and adopting a 'precautionary principle' to livestock, foreseeing and adapting to risks. Initiated in mid-2007, ANIPLAN aims to help organic farmers' livestock – in this case, cattle – carry out natural behaviours and live with as little intrusion as possible. Spotting disharmony early and intervening: planning and prevention, before treatment or medicine, is the approach taken.

WELFARE 'NOT GUARANTEED'

Previous EU network project reports on organic farming have established that being certified organic does not necessarily equate to good AHW: lack of awareness and education can prevent proper implementation of the organic regulations. Farming conditions and traditions across Europe are also vastly different, so attempting to make plans too uniform would be restrictive and unsuccessful. To that end, Project Coordinator Dr Mette Vaarst and her team set about creating assessments which represented the different types of herds operating in Europe: "The Austrian project partners developed an adjusted protocol to assess the cows' welfare on farms, and partners from all the participating countries attended a one-week-training session so they agreed on different levels and how to work with the parameters in the protocol," she asserts. In addition, a protocol for welfare assessment of calves was developed by the Norwegian project partners.

> If animal health and welfare plans are to gain widespread use among organic farmers, communication both with farmers and the farming community is crucial

This project differs from its predecessors through its emphasis on 'animal based' parameters: those describing the condition of the animal itself. A number of parameters also described housing, feeding and management; again, difficult to measure consistently across countries, because the conditions are so different in terms of herd size, housing systems, climatic conditions and many other factors. ANIPLAN has evaluated AHW in a number of organic dairy herds in the UK, Austria, Germany, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Norway and Denmark, with strong emphasis on animal-based parameters. Armed with findings from other recent projects like the EU-funded WelfareQuality, this project wishes to encourage continuous monitoring and assessment, integrated with active animal health and welfare planning which tailors the needs to location and differentiates between cow and calves' needs.

ACTIVE, WELL-PLANNED AHW PROMOTION

So what could this mean for farmers, in practice – and how can advice be provided as part of the veterinary and agricultural advisory services throughout Europe? While its overarching aim is the investigation and development of active, well-planned AHW promotion and disease prevention in organic dairy herds, this is foreseen to lead to lessening use of medicine. Thus constant evaluation and reappraisal is key to ensure that the planned improvements in the herd also lead to the results which the farmer aims at, in terms of

better health and welfare as well as productivity. Accordingly, the structure of the process must reflect this need for ongoing feedback, dialogue and analysis. With an overall objective of developing AHW planning principles for diverse conditions, the project utilised the WelfareQuality parameters to create an overview of herds living in different types of organic systems, which included access to pasture systems, longer cow/calf contact and other factors.

Another goal was the development of guidelines for communication on animal health and welfare promotion in different settings, building into existing programmes like the Danish Stable Schools and the Dutch farmer network groups. Within the project's relatively short timescale, various animal health advisory service and animal health planning concepts have been developed, serving as inspiration for the development animal health and welfare planning principles. Vaarst is enthusiastic about the scale and application of their results: "We have collected data on medicine use in 147 herds from seven European countries, which are being analysed statistically: results show significant reduction in medicine use in participating herds". After initially assessing farms, a summary report was written and farmers were approached to enter into dialogue – with a project partner or in other cases a farmers' group – about what could be improved. In relation to this, the project team has collected information both on what worked and what did not work so well, which enables the team to give practical guidelines about important elements of the animal health and welfare planning process.

CREATIVE DIALOGUE

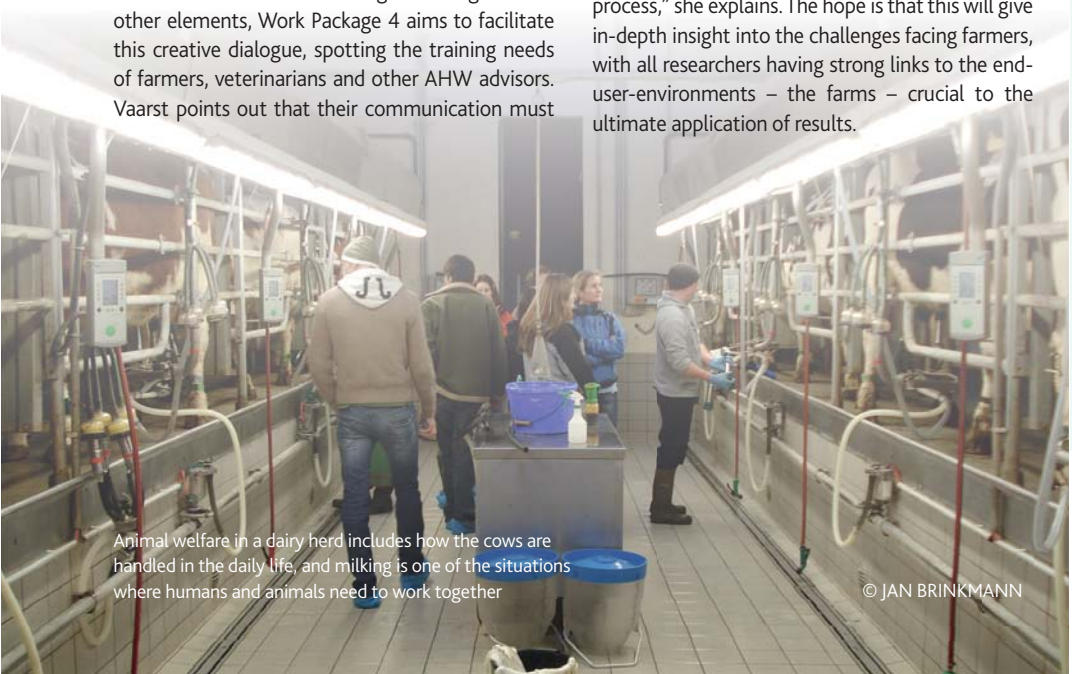
If animal health and welfare plans are to gain widespread use among organic farmers, communication both with and within the farming community is crucial. This 'creative dialogue' – either through dialogue with one advisor or in farmers' groups – could be the catalyst to farmers taking ownership and implementing AHW planning. Such activities in all the participating countries show the benefits of this dialogue. Throughout the other elements, Work Package 4 aims to facilitate this creative dialogue, spotting the training needs of farmers, veterinarians and other AHW advisors. Vaarst points out that their communication must adhere to a clear set of values to be effective: "Basic principles of communication are important, such as creating ownership over decisions by the farmer, directed by a set of nine principles which we have developed in the project," she remarks.

In brief, these principles are based around: health plans which incorporate health promotion and disease handling, in a cycle of current status/evaluation/action/review to enable continuous development and improvement; farm specificity; farm ownership – farmers formulate and guide the agenda; external involvement (advisor, farmer or facilitator); external knowledge; organic principles framework – perhaps obvious, but not referenced enough; and finally, involving all relevant persons in the farm environment.

AN ON-FARM FUTURE

In terms of the project's pan-European scope, Vaarst believes the main challenges have also been its advantages to develop results which are applicable in different contexts: differences between countries, farming traditions and cultures. But a much more challenging factor has been the limited time scales for the project, Vaarst believes: "This has only been possible because most of us knew each from previous networks. Three years is very short and really robust results cannot be expected". Such collaboration of networks has been the lynchpin of the venture, she goes on to explain: "If we want to develop something for use under different conditions, we have to collaborate and include experience, data and analyses from different conditions. Mountain farms in Switzerland based on family farming are very different from 250-cow British herds which include farm managers and farm workers, and our project results are based on analysis of similarities and contrasts between participating countries".

ANIPLAN's practical focus is also something Vaarst wishes to expose: "The carrying element in the project has been on-farm-research and action research, where a number of researchers in the project were directly and deeply involved in the process," she explains. The hope is that this will give in-depth insight into the challenges facing farmers, with all researchers having strong links to the end-user-environments – the farms – crucial to the ultimate application of results.



Animal welfare in a dairy herd includes how the cows are handled in the daily life, and milking is one of the situations where humans and animals need to work together

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INTELLIGENCE

ANIPLAN

MINIMISING MEDICINE USE IN ORGANIC DAIRY HERDS THROUGH ANIMAL HEALTH AND WELFARE PLANNING

OBJECTIVES

The project aims to: develop animal health and welfare planning principles for organic dairy farms under diverse conditions based on an evaluation of current experiences; carry out animal health and welfare assessments in different types of dairy herds across Europe; and develop guidelines for communication about animal health and welfare promotion in different settings

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