Symbiotic Guardians: At the intersection of animal welfare, human rights and the environment

Policy Briefing
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In February 2022 the European Commission published its proposal for a Directive on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence. This directive shall require from EU companies, as well as certain non-EU companies operating in the EU, to address human rights and environmental issues in their value chains through mandatory due diligence for human rights, environmental, and climate-change concerns.

This legislative proposal is an opportunity for the EU and its Member States to address animal welfare throughout international supply chains. By including animal welfare in the due diligence efforts imposed on companies, the EU and its Member States would better contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the legislation. Indeed, improving animal welfare throughout the value chain would benefit the right to health by reducing the risk of food-borne diseases and zoonoses and by allowing to lessen the use of antibiotics in livestock farming, one of the key triggers of the current surge in antimicrobial resistance. It would also provide leverage to fight human rights violations in the animal agriculture industry.

The absence of any international convention on animal welfare shall not be an obstacle for this legislation to cover animal welfare. The directive can set the threshold at EU standards for all companies operating in the EU market. The extra-territoriality of EU standards for companies or products placed on the EU market has already been set by Council Regulation (EC) N° 1099/2009 on the protection of animals at the time of killing, according to which slaughterhouses in third countries exporting meat to the EU must comply with standards similar to those applied to slaughterhouses in the EU.
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In February 2022 the European Commission announced its proposal for a Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDD).\textsuperscript{[i]} According to the inception impact assessment\textsuperscript{[ii]}, the due diligence mechanism would require “companies to take measures to address their adverse sustainability impacts, such as climate change, environmental, human rights (including workers and child labour) harm in their own operations and in their value chain by identifying and preventing relevant risks and mitigating negative impact”.

Obligations under the proposals increase with the size of the companies but broadly the CSDD Directive will require companies doing business in or with the EU to conduct human rights and environmental due diligence by:

- integrating due diligence into their policies;
- identifying actual or potential adverse impacts;
- preventing and mitigating potential adverse impacts, bringing actual adverse impacts to an end and minimising their extent;
- establishing and maintaining a complaints procedure;
- monitoring the effectiveness of their due diligence policy and measures;
- publicly communicating on due diligence.

Eurogroup for Animals welcomes this proposal, but also believes it can – and should – go further to encompass animal welfare and acknowledge deep links between animal welfare, human rights, and the environment. The CSDD should therefore mention animal welfare as a component of the ‘adverse environmental impact’ and/or of the ‘adverse human right impact’ that the CSDD intends to fight. Indeed, improving animal welfare throughout the value chain would:

- **Benefit the right to health**, which is a fundamental part of our human rights as recognised by the World Health Organisation (WHO), by reducing the risk of food-borne diseases and zoonoses, and allowing to lessen the use of antibiotics in livestock farming.
- **Provide leverage to fight the violations of human rights in the animal agriculture industry.**
• Contribute to deliver on the EU Green Deal and the Farm to Fork strategy, which calls for an urgent need to “improve animal welfare to achieve a fair transition towards sustainable food systems”.

According to the inception impact assessment, the due diligence duty “could be designed by building on existing authoritative guidelines using well-established definitions as developed by the UN and later expanded by the OECD”.

This means the OECD’s definition of “Responsible Business Conduct” (RBC)\[^{iii}\] should be relevant in defining the content of the due diligence obligation. On 8 June 2023, the OECD released a “targeted update” of the RBC, which for the first time calls on businesses to uphold animal welfare in their policies and practices.

The EU has made a clear link between animal welfare and sustainable development in domestic and international policies. For instance, the Farm-to-Fork strategy aims to transpose the Green Deal into EU farm policies, by among others improving the welfare of farmed animals. At a global level, the EU supported a landmark resolution at the UNEA’s 5th session on the nexus between animal welfare and people’s health and the environment. The resolution is a first step towards animal welfare being addressed at a global level.

As animal welfare is strongly linked to sustainable development, and is now included in the OECD’s RBC and in various EU sustainability related policies, we believe the EU and its Member States should be coherent and explicitly include animal welfare in the scope of the future CSDD.

Evidence is mounting on the interconnectedness between higher animal welfare and other vital sustainability goals such as a healthy environment, healthy people and sustainable economies.

This is elegantly expressed in the concept of “One Health”, first put forward by the Wildlife Conservation Society in 2004. Over the years, the concept has evolved and been refined through cooperation between multiple international agencies including Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the WHO to mean:

“Aan integrated, unifying approach that aims to sustainably balance and optimize the health of people, animals and ecosystems. It recognizes the health of humans, domestic and wild animals, plants, and the wider environment (including ecosystems) are closely linked and interdependent.

“The approach mobilizes multiple sectors, disciplines and communities at varying levels of society to work together to foster well-being and tackle threats to health and ecosystems, while addressing the collective need for clean water, energy and air, safe and nutritious food, taking action on climate changes and contributing to sustainable development.”\[^{iv}\]
The first academic study on this interconnectedness between animal welfare and sustainability, published in October 2019, identified the interactions between SDGs and Animal Welfare, in both directions. It concluded that, even if animal welfare is not explicitly mentioned in the SDGs, it is positively linked with all of them, to various degrees.

There was no evidence that higher animal welfare impedes any SDG. On the contrary, for some including SDG 12 – Sustainable Consumption and Production and SDG 14 – Life Below Water, the mutually beneficial effect is strong. For others, including SDG 1 – End Poverty, SDG 2 – Zero Hunger, SDG 3 – Good Health and Wellbeing, higher welfare would have a direct positive impact. Overall, production systems with the potential to provide higher animal welfare conditions are also more likely to have less negative impacts on the environment, the climate and livelihoods.

Including animal welfare in the scope of the future EU-wide corporate due diligence obligation would strongly encourage existing trends in the business sector, where animal welfare is already very often part of due diligence efforts, especially when the risks linked to animal welfare are the highest, as in the food and textile sectors.

In contrast, restricting the scope of the future CSDDD underestimates the deep connection between animal welfare, environmental health, human health and thriving, sustainable economies and would undermine the EU’s stated policy of being at the forefront of policies that create a fairer, greener, more equitable world.

While the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) often comes to mind when discussing animal conservation at global level, it is mainly a global legislative framework designed to protect endangered plants and animals from the threats of international trade. Therefore, CITES falls short in the context of the proposed directive; it only covers wild animals, leaving out farmed ones, and it touches upon conservation, rather than wellbeing and protection.

The World Organization for Animal Health has been at the forefront of international animal welfare standards since 2004. Its standards have since been recognized by the World Trade Organisation and have begun to be incorporated into international trade negotiations – though only as non-binding guidelines for companies that produce animal products or deal with animal-related issues in their value chains.

However, the absence of international conventions on animal welfare shall not be an obstacle to address animal welfare as an adverse impact in
international supply chains.

The extra-territoriality of EU standards for companies or products placed in the EU market has already been set by Council Regulation (EC) No. 1099/2009 on the protection of animals at the time of killing, where slaughterhouses in third countries exporting meat to the EU must comply with similar standards to those applied to slaughterhouses in the EU. While they may concern the subject of animal welfare, the impetus for these standards is often human interest. For example, laws governing the husbandry and slaughter of farmed animals impact individual animal suffering as well as the human interests of ensuring food safety, mitigating disease spread, and consumer protection from false and misleading advertising and marketing.

Finally, extending such a mechanism to animal welfare would be fully in line with EU goals, as Article 13 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), expressly recognises that animals are sentient beings and provides that the EU shall be mindful of animal welfare when formulating its policies.
Measures to improve animal welfare in international supply chains would have a significant positive impact in protecting the Human Right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

We are all “ecologically embedded beings”\(^\text{[vii]}\). A safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment is the foundation for most basic human rights and if our environment is unsafe, unclean, unhealthy and unsustainable, we risk harming these and other human rights as well.\(^\text{[viii]}\)

In 2017 the Inter-American Court of Human Rights even stressed that “as an autonomous right, the right to a healthy environment, unlike other rights, protects the components of the environment, such as forests, rivers, and seas, as legal interests in themselves, even in the absence of the certainty or evidence of a risk to individuals.”\(^\text{[ix]}\)

Support for this idea is growing. In August 2022 the UN General Assembly passed a resolution recognising the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a human right. The resolution was passed by a recorded vote of 161 in favour and zero against. As UN special rapporteur David Boyd pointed out, “all human rights ultimately depend on a healthy biosphere”\(^\text{[x]}\).

But human rights to a healthy environment, and the responsibilities that this imposes on us as stewards of the plants, cannot be separated from the rights of other living beings.

It is now well-established that animal welfare, especially in the livestock sector, has a huge impact on our biosphere. In particular, industrial animal agriculture, in addition to raising multiple welfare issues for the animals trapped within this system, is a significant contributor to the ongoing climate crisis, to biodiversity loss and degradation of the environment at local, regional and global levels. This contribution takes many forms:

- Greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) from the digestive processes of the billions of animals farmed and slaughtered annually, from feed production, and from fossil fuels used for the transportation of live animals and animal products around the
globe in an increasingly globalised market;
- Biodiversity loss due to industrial agriculture and the illegal trade in wildlife;
- Deforestation in areas where large-scale deforestation for ranching and animal feed production is common such as tropical rainforests in the global south where land is sometimes cleared by way of lighting forest fires that subsequently burn out of control\[xi\];
- Water pollution from land-based systems where improper or inadequate manure management systems and the excessive application of fertilisers and pesticides, cause algae blooms that degrade waterways and kill all aquatic life;
- Water pollution from mismanaged ocean-based aquaculture facilities that have caused immense harm to local ecosystems;
- Soil degradation through changes in land use, over-grazing and monoculture farming to produce animal feed.

Each of these contributions is significant in itself. Taken together they make a compelling case for linking the welfare of animals with the welfare of humans and their environment.

**GHG emissions**

Scientists and activists all over the world have warned of the urgency of significantly reducing GHG emissions to preserve, as much as possible, a clean, healthy and sustainable environment for future generations.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the global livestock sector is responsible for 14.5% of global GHG emissions.\[xii\] In terms of activities, feed production and processing (including land use change) and enteric fermentation from ruminants are the two main sources of emissions, representing 45% and 39% of total emissions, respectively. Manure storage and processing represent 10%. The remaining 6% is attributable to the processing and transportation of animal products.

In addition the FAO reports that about 44% of livestock emissions are in the form of methane (CH\(_4\)). The remaining part is almost equally shared between nitrous oxide (N\(_2\)O, 29%) and carbon dioxide (CO\(_2\), 27%).

The animal farming lobby has frequently argued that the risks of methane are overstated, as it does not remain in the atmosphere for as long as CO\(_2\). However, in 2021 the International Panel on Climate Change warned that in the first 20 years after release, methane is around 80 times more powerful than CO\(_2\), and therefore curbing methane emissions in the short term is essential while the world works to reduce its long-term CO\(_2\) emissions\[xiii\].

Reducing the number of farmed animals produced annually is a crucial part of this picture. Scientific modelling has shown that rapid global phaseout of animal agriculture has the potential to offset 68% of emissions this century, providing half of the net emission reductions necessary to limit warming to 2\(\degree\)C.\[xiv\]
Biodiversity loss

Biodiversity is in crisis. Only 23% of species and 16% of habitats under the EU nature directives are in good health\[xvi\].

Biodiversity loss has substantial impacts on humans and non-human animals alike. For humans, the rights to food, clean air and water, health, culture and even the right to life are threatened by widespread species decline. Furthermore, the UN has warned that biodiversity loss may “disproportionately harm the human rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, women and girls, children and youth, the poor, and those in vulnerable situations”\[xvi\].

A study published by Chatham House in 2021\[xvii\] revealed that the global food system is a primary driver of biodiversity loss. Livestock production is the single biggest cause of land-use change and habitat destruction, accounting for 80% of all land-use change globally.

The report has found that the “cheaper food paradigm” has led to the intensification of food production, which has resulted in a multitude of ecological impacts and an overall degraded ecosystem. Intensive animal farming leads to land clearance for grazing and grain production for animal feed. This is a direct cause of biodiversity loss.

For animals, habitat loss poses major welfare risks including preventing safe animal movement across the landscape, restricting expression of normal behaviours and denying animals’ access to basic needs such as food, water and shelter. Other impacts include stress, injury, illness, pain, psychological distress and death\[xviii\].

The wildlife trade

Globally, the wildlife trade – both legal and illegal – is the second biggest threat to biodiversity. Every year, millions of wild animals are captured, ending up as pets or killed for food. Alternatively, their hides may become handbags or rugs, or their body parts may be used in traditional medicines, as status symbols or décor (e.g. elephant ivory). Not only does this have obvious impacts on the individual animals, but a recent meta-study has found that, overall, species declined in abundance by 62% where trade occurred\[xix\].

In 2016, a joint report by INTERPOL and UNEP linked environmental crimes, such as wildlife trafficking, with other serious illegal activity, including corruption, counterfeiting, drug trafficking and financial crime as well as with terrorism and non-state armed groups\[xx\]. In addition, the welfare of wildlife – particularly the conditions in which they are caught, transported and kept – have direct and fatal consequences for human health and safety, with the rise in zoonotic diseases linked directly to this\[xxi\].

In December 2022 the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) concluded with the adoption of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework\[xxii\], a set of targets to reverse the trend of biodiversity loss and protect wildlife and ecosystems. The framework
includes four overarching goals and 23 targets aiming to protect 30% of the planet, restore 30% of ecosystems and double resources for nature conservation by 2030.

The text provides that “the framework is to be implemented with consideration of the One Health approach”, therefore recognising the interlinkages between the health of the environment, animals and humans.

**Deforestation**

Deforestation, a major cause of biodiversity loss, is linked to livestock farming in two ways: first, land can be cleared directly for animals to gain access to new pastures. Second, land can be cleared to produce crop feed, which is necessary to feed animals kept on industrial farms in Europe in the US, China and elsewhere.

When forests are cleared to make space for animal agriculture, wildlife diversity decreases as native species are displaced. Local and regional populations – both indigenous and traditional communities – whose survival depends on intact and functional forest ecosystems, are severely affected by deforestation. Some communities have been forced to relocate entirely, and many are unable to survive the transition.

A report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) found that deforestation is largely carried out by criminal networks with enormous resources that allow them to coordinate large-scale illegal logging operations and to deploy armed guards to protect these operations. The report lists 28 murders and 44 death threats in the Brazilian Amazon between 2015-18.

The report also found that indigenous peoples play a central role in protecting forests and regularly organise initiatives to control and combat deforestation occurring within their sovereign borders. But they are also the ones most likely to be victims of violence and even death, at the hands of those responsible for deforestation.

**Water pollution**

Fresh water is vital to life on earth and is inextricably linked to poverty reduction, economic growth and food security. Over two billion people already suffer from water scarcity, hampering economic and social development. Agriculture uses approximately 70% of the available freshwater supply. Livestock is a significant part of this, with an estimated 41% of total agricultural water used for feed production alone.

The UN has recognised that “intensive livestock production is probably the largest sector-specific source of water pollution”. Industrial animal agriculture produces large quantities of manure, which is usually spread on nearby fields as the cost of transportation is too high. Excess nutrients are unable to be taken up by the plants, meaning they leach into both groundwater and surface water streams. In some of Spain’s main pig farming regions, for example, groundwater nitrate levels have been found to be up to four times higher than the legal threshold of 50 mg per litre. The overall contribution of European livestock production to water pollution, both in phosphorus and nitrogen, is estimated at 73% of the overall agricultural impact.
In the UK a 2020 study by Natural Resources Wales found that more than half the River Wye in Wales failed to meet targets on pollution\[xxxii\]. The river catchment is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty but it is also the chicken capital of the UK where an estimated 20 million birds\[xxxiii\] are farmed. High levels of phosphate in the manure, washed into the river from the surrounding poultry farms are now a major cause of pollution in the river.\[xxxiv\]

An excess of nutrients in water bodies can cause an overgrowth of algae, eventually leading to eutrophication, a reduction in the amount of oxygen in water bodies. This is harmful both to aquatic species and to the humans whose food supplies and livelihoods depend on them.

If the pollution continues, water bodies can become completely devoid of life, making it impossible to use them as sources of drinking water or for swimming/bathing. In addition, human consumption of drinking water contaminated with nitrates can cause serious health problems, including colorectal cancer and thyroid disease\[xxxv\].

**Marine pollution**

Aquaculture – the fastest growing form of food production in the world – is also highly polluting. What many policymakers might refer to as the “blue economy” might more accurately be called the factory farming of the sea.

Fish and shellfish farms have been growing at a dizzying pace around the world, particularly in China. Globally, between 1990 and 2018, fish farming grew 527%, according to the UN’s FAO\[xxxvi\].

Intensive fish farming subjects fish to overcrowding, stress and disease. It also produces several different types of waste which pollutes the water and harms aquatic life. These include:

- Faeces and uneaten food from open cage fish farms load the marine environment with excess nutrients\[xxxvii\] that lead to eutrophication, or ‘dead zones’ where oxygen levels in water are depleted and marine life, both wild and farmed, is unable to survive.
- Medicines, such as lice treatments, which can negatively impact other marine animals and plants, and antibiotics\[xxxviii\] which can force the emergence of antibiotic-resistant
bacteria, harming our ability to treat human diseases.

Aquaculture can also consume a large amount of freshwater through pond evaporation, dilution needs and fish feed production. The Water Footprint Network (WFN) estimates the water footprint of aquaculture in freshwater and brackish environments in China to be 3,349–21,215 m$^3$/tonne and 2,204–57,125 m$^3$/tonne respectively. The higher ranges outstrip even beef’s water footprints.

**Soil degradation**

Soil is the “fragile skin that anchors all life on Earth”[xl]. It is an entire ecosystem in itself, comprising billions of species and providing an invaluable resource to humanity. The UN has estimated[xli] that 40% of land on earth is now classed as degraded.

**Industrial livestock farming is a primary cause of soil degradation.** A recent meta-analysis[xlii] has found that heavy grazing had a significant negative impact on the health of the soil – including increased compaction and reduced microbial life and soil moisture.

In addition, deforestation and other land use changes, especially those linked to animal feed production, weaken the physical structure of the soil and seriously undermine its natural ability for nutrient storage and recycling and water storage, drainage and filtration.

Degraded soils give rise to poverty, hunger, and pollution while making communities more vulnerable to disease and disasters, particularly in the drylands that cover more than 45% of the Earth’s land surface and are home to one in three people[xiii].
Measures to improve animal welfare would benefit the stability of the food chain, either by increasing the quantities of cereals and grains available for human consumption or by guaranteeing the safety of animal-based products placed on the market.

According to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights\[xliv\], the right to adequate food is realised when “every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement.”

The industrial agricultural system, with its emphasis on high-productivity and low cost, threatens medium- and long-term food security. This system depends on growing large quantities of grains to feed to the animals raised in intensive conditions. This is inefficient; research has shown that for every 100 calories fed to animals as cereals, just 17 to 30 enter the human food chain as meat\[xlv\]. The FAO has warned that further use of cereals as animal feed could threaten food security by reducing the grain available for human consumption\[xlvi\].

In addition, the stability of the food chain can also be jeopardised by poor animal welfare measures, which are intrinsically linked to poor animal health standards. These can result in disease and mass mortality, or poor-quality products that cannot be safely placed on the market. For example, the 2018 outbreak of African Swine Flu in China, fostered by poor hygiene and sanitary practices, has led to the death of an estimated 46 million pigs\[xlvii\]. This has put significant pressure on food supply chains, both in China and worldwide.
Measures to improve animal welfare would undoubtedly have a significant positive impact on tackling adverse impacts on human health such as antimicrobial resistance, the risk of zoonotic diseases, food safety and dietary concerns.

The WHO Constitution (1946) envisages "...the highest attainable standard of health as a fundamental right of every human being"[xlviii]. The World Organisation for Animal Health recognises that “human health and animal health are interdependent and bound to the health of the ecosystems in which they exist’’[xlix].

Industrial farming models adversely impact human health in multiple ways, including antimicrobial resistance, the risk of zoonotic diseases, food safety and dietary concerns. These are explored below.

**Antimicrobial resistance**

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) – the ability of microorganisms to develop a resistance to antimicrobial treatments – has a direct impact on both human and animal health. It is already responsible for an estimated 35,000 deaths in the EU per year[l], and the problem is worsening. The WHO has called AMR “one of the biggest threats to global health, food security, and development today’’[li].

The links between industrial livestock farming and AMR are well understood and widely acknowledged. This type of farming involves keeping large numbers of animals at high densities, often in unsanitary conditions, providing fertile conditions for bacteria to thrive and spread. Fast growing breeds are used and kept in very stressful conditions, both of which compromise immune function[lii].

Low genetic diversity means less natural immunity to pathogens[liii]. Moreover, antibiotics are often used to enhance animal growth, which provides even more opportunities for resistant strains of bacteria to develop[liv]. It is estimated that 70% of the total consumption of antibiotics is in the livestock sector[lv].
Animals who are less stressed and kept in better conditions are less prone to disease, meaning fewer antibiotics will be needed. In 2017, the EFSA and the European Medicine Agency (EMA) recommended “improving husbandry and management procedures for disease prevention and control and rethinking livestock production systems to reduce inherent disease risk”. Ensuring animal welfare legislation is sufficient, robust and enforceable is a vital part of managing the risk of AMR, both now and in the future.

Zoonotic disease emergence

Zoonoses are infectious diseases which pass from animals to humans. They can cause gastrointestinal problems (such as E.coli and Salmonella), recurring disease outbreaks (such as Ebola) or even global pandemics. Indeed, the habitual overuse of antibiotics in industrial animal production and the resulting emergence of antibiotic resistance threatens to lead to pathogens more destructive than SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic.

Due to their wide-ranging and potentially deadly impacts, zoonoses represent a major public health problem. An estimated 60% of known infectious diseases and up to 75% of new or emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic in origin. It is estimated that they are responsible for 2.5 billion cases of human illness and 2.7 million human deaths worldwide each year.

Once again, the links to industrial agriculture are clear. A recent study found that “since 1940, agricultural drivers were associated with over 25% of all – and over 50% of zoonotic — infectious diseases that emerged in humans, proportions that will likely increase as agriculture expands and intensifies.”

A recent study by Compassion in World Farming examined Salmonella, E. coli and Campylobacter (bacteria that can cause food poisoning) as well as Avian and Swine Influenza (both caused by viruses). They discovered that “the risk of Salmonella and E. coli infection is often greater in intensive production conditions”. In addition, they concluded that “the geographical concentration of large-scale poultry and pig production and the transport of animals over long distances facilitates the emergence of new strains of influenza viruses that can give rise to human pandemics”.

In order to protect both animals and humans from current and potential future zoonotic diseases, it is vital that high animal welfare is prioritised by policymakers. This includes using breeds, diets and conditions that optimise health and immunity, as well as limiting transportation times.

Non-communicable diseases and diets

According to the WHO, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are “by far the leading cause of mortality” in Europe. Taken together, the four main NCDs – cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory diseases – account for nearly 75% of deaths across the region.
Malnutrition, including obesity, is a key risk factor for NCDs and there is increasing evidence that diets high in meat are key risk factors for such health problems. A large, population-level study in 2021 found that people who consumed unprocessed red meat and processed meat regularly (three or more times per week) were more likely than low meat-eaters to smoke, drink alcohol, be overweight or obese, and eat less fruit and vegetables, fibre and fish.

The proliferation of cheap and processed meat on the supermarket shelves across the West is enabled by industrial animal farming. Farming systems with poor welfare standards enable large quantities of meat output, but at a very high cost to the animals and the surrounding ecosystems. By introducing more stringent animal welfare measures alongside consumer information campaigns, it is likely that a shift would occur to diets with less, better quality meat. This would have positive impacts on public health.
Measures to improve animal welfare will undoubtedly have a significant positive impact on the safety and security of workers, as it would improve working conditions in a high-risk sector and it can contribute to tackling the psychological toll of poor animal welfare practices on workers.

Labour rights – including the right to safe and healthy working conditions, the right to fair wages and the right to reasonable working hours with paid holiday – have been recognised by the UN as human rights: "the ability to exercise these rights in the workplace is prerequisite for workers to enjoy a broad range of other rights, whether economic, social, cultural, political or otherwise"[lxiv].

This right is enshrined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as SDG 8[lxv] which recognises the importance of decent work and economic growth.

Labour violations in the agricultural sector are commonplace. The European Commission’s due diligence proposals have named agriculture a high-risk sector, meaning smaller companies in this sector will also have to complete due diligence checks of their supply chains[lxvi]. However, not all agricultural jobs are equal, and those in industrial meat production are at particularly high risk of labour rights violations throughout the supply chain.

The meat industry in particular came under scrutiny during the Covid-19 pandemic, when slaughterhouses and meat processing plants became breeding grounds for the virus. An investigation into these outbreaks by the European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions reported cold and humid work environments where repetitive strain injuries, cuts, falls and musculoskeletal disorders are commonplace[lxvii]. Moreover, job insecurity, poor wages and long working hours are the norm, and labour turnover rates are high.

Many countries in Europe rely on migrant labour for their meat industry workforce. In the Netherlands, for example, migrants – mostly from Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland – make up more than 60% of the industry’s 12,000 workers and up to 90% in production...
roles[^viii]. A 2021 Guardian investigation found that migrant workers in Europe’s meat industry are often precariously employed by subcontractors and can earn 40-50% less than employees in the same factory. They reported that workers often have undefined working hours, zero-hours contracts and no sick pay, and struggle to understand agreements and their legal rights[^box].

In addition, the psychological toll of poor animal welfare practices on workers is well-documented. A study commissioned by the French Ministry of Labour in 2011[^box] lists contact with animal suffering as a risk factor for psychological distress. A study in Turkey, where animals are not stunned before slaughter, also showed that butchers, especially those operating in slaughterhouses, demonstrated more psychological pain than office workers[^box].
Animal welfare is a key concern for EU citizens. By including animal welfare concerns in international supply chains, the ethical concerns of EU citizens, and their consumer rights, including the right to safety, information and choice, can be better protected.

An individual’s right to dignity, prosperity and honour are key principles of human rights. This is the basis upon which consumer rights, including the right to safety, information and choice, can be considered human rights.

There is increasing evidence that consumers care about the impacts of the way their food, especially animal products, are produced. Most EU citizens report having at least some interest in the welfare of farmed animals: in the 2016 Eurobarometer\[lxxii\] 94% said it was “very” or “somewhat” important.

However, evidence shows that consumers do not have a good understanding of supply chain practices. A 2022 study by the European Commission\[lxxiii\] found that two thirds of EU consumers perceived that the information available to them was not sufficient for them to make informed choices based on animal welfare.

Other evidence shows that when consumers are informed about animal rights abuses in supply chains, they often make different purchasing decisions: meat reduction is significantly higher (+ 44%) among those who have seen negative media stories about meat compared to those who had not (+ 26%)\[lxxiv\].

This lack of information is a serious problem for consumer’s right to choose and is likely to mean that consumers are frequently making purchasing decisions which go against their ethical or religious views. Strengthened consumer rights, on the other hand, will provide consumers with greater power to influence supply chain practices. Greater transparency would inevitably lead to improved animal welfare, since there would be a much bigger reputational risk to companies who engage in harmful practices.
Eurogroup for Animals welcomes the European Commission’s proposal for a Directive on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence and calls on the European Parliament and Member States to explicitly include animal welfare in the due diligence efforts imposed on companies.

- The preamble of the CSDDD must include a recital explicitly linking animal welfare to sustainable development. For instance, by stating that the due diligence requirements under the directive contribute to protecting the well-being of people, animals and ecosystems from environment-related risks and negative impacts.
- The “adverse environmental impacts” defined in Article 3 – paragraph 1 – point b of the proposed text must be broadened beyond the conventions listed in the annex. The “adverse environmental impact” could then be defined as resulting from the violation of one of the conventions listed in the Annex, or from any adverse impact from an environmental list of categories, which must include animal welfare and biodiversity.
- “Animal products” must be added to the list of high risk sectors. This is important because the scope of the legislation is limited to big companies - about 1% of EU companies - but the threshold is much lower for companies operating in high risk sectors.

Including animal welfare among the due diligence obligations would not only be coherent with EU domestic and international policies, but would also better contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the legislation.
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