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Animal welfare

Animal welfare is an issue that comes up from time to time. It mostly originates from anti-leather campaigns and animal rights group but the question is, are they really wrong?

There was a recent scandal in Belgium regarding the treatment of pigs in a slaughterhouse, then about the mistreatment of cattle. Shortly after, some 20,000 pigs died in a fire in the Netherlands after the farmer reportedly failed to install fire alarms or fire prevention equipment like a simple sprinkler system.

There are videos published that show animals being transported from one country to another in unbelievably dire conditions. One example is cramped cattle transported by truck from Hungary to Italy, which has resulted in animals dying of thirst. There are also clips of cattle being loaded on to ships in Hamburg and unloaded in some Middle Eastern

ports in ways that are objectively unacceptable.

I have observed cattle being unloaded from trucks in Conakry, Guinea in a way that means cows must jump from a truck to the ground. Cows can't jump and so there is a risk of them breaking their legs; those that do break a leg or legs are "convinced" to crawl to the slaughter floor by heavy beatings.

Unbelievable situations are taking place at the biggest slaughterhouses in N'Djamena in Chad, where terrified animals are lifted by one of their front legs with a chain and then have their throats slit. The bleeding animal is then dumped on a heap of other animals that are thrashing around in their death throes. This has nothing to do with ritual slaughter; it is plain cruelty, which has no reason to exist.

Similarly, the slaughter of camels in some North African countries is, by any standard, totally beyond the acceptability



levels of normal people. There is also the slaughter of bulls and buffalo in Indian municipality slaughterhouses, which cannot but raise eyebrows.

Collective responsibility

In most cases, the mistreatment of slaughter animals is the result of cultural ignorance, frustration due to an inability to deal with the animals or lack of supervision. Butchers are so used to animals suffering that it simply does not occur to them that what they are doing can be done much better.

This is just not acceptable and these examples give our industry a very bad image. This is then exploited by those that oppose the meat and leather industry. In short, the animal rights group are not completely wrong, rather it is their approach and their unwillingness to work constructively to improve the situation that is wrong. Slaughter will never be eliminated, no matter what vegetarians and vegans say.

Regardless of what happens in the farming and meat industry, the leather industry is not responsible for the treatment of animals. We do not deal with animals, either dead or alive. We deal with the by-products of the meat industry, which transforms mostly purpose-bred animals into a consumer product, namely meat. Ours is an ecological service that, rather than costing money, generates money and profits and creates hundreds of thousands of jobs around the world.

The question is whether or not we should turn a blind eye to the malpractices in the farming and meat production industries. Morally, I believe we cannot turn a blind eye to malpractices in any part of the leather value chain. We should not accept the mistreatment of animals, just as we don't accept child labour or forced labour.

Veterinarians, which are currently assigned to slaughterhouses by the authorities, look at whether the meat is edible, not at how the meat is produced. They are the first people responsible for guaranteeing the proper treatment of slaughter animals. Better treatment generates amazing results, not only for the animals but also for meat and leather quality.

With proper instructions (the Leather Working Group could add a chapter on this subject to their protocols) and with proper supervision in organised slaughterhouses, huge improvements can be obtained at zero cost. This would eliminate the arguments of animal rights groups.

Traceability system

Each part of the leather value chain has its own minimal requirements of acceptable decency. The branding of animals can be avoided by applying ear tags with numbers, barcodes or RFID chips. RFID chips, like those used in Botswana, are small implants that allow relevant medical data about the animals, such as vaccinations or treatment with antibiotics, to be recorded. They can also serve to record changes of ownership or transport from one location to another, and to keep a record of the slaughterhouse where the animal was processed. After slaughter the ear tag or implant can be reprogrammed and transferred to a

newly-born animal, allowing the whole process to start again from zero.

At the slaughterhouse the ear tag or chip data can be added to the hide or skin traceability system, based on 2D or 3D barcodes, that is now required in the European Union. This data can be linked to an animal welfare compliance certification for each stage of the process, from an animal's birth up to its final transformation. It can also apply beyond this stage to its products, such as meat, or its by-products, which include the hide or skin.

Without input, there is no output so cattle farms, dealers and transport companies must all be certified and occasionally monitored to ensure the imposed standards are being implemented, not just on paper but in reality. I am well aware that writing this down is simple, while the creation of a reliable system is much more complicated.

Work to be done

A similar system could also provide the basis for a leather traceability system, which is increasingly a requirement of brands and big distribution chains. It is also incorporated into one of the Leather Working Group's requirements. The basic cost of such a system is minimal; it can be between a mere 10 cents and a dollar depending on the sophistication and distribution of the system and the software required to keep track of changes.

Implementing this in Western countries would be relatively easy; it is already at least partly in place. To implement such a system in developing and emerging countries, particularly where meat production is not on an industrial scale, would require time and increased laws and regulations.

Nothing will happen overnight and the resistance will be huge because any traceability system is likely to unearth some unorthodox practices, especially where animals or their hides are known to cross borders when they should not. With a proper timeframe and step-by-step implementation demands, it would be possible for a system to be established, implemented and maintained.

This has to take place from the bottom up as operators have respect for their clients. If a client, or better all clients, set the rules, the supplier would need to adapt otherwise they would not be able to obtain a decent price for their products. This is what is happening now in the leather industry with brands demanding that tanneries remain within certain parameters in their use of chemicals. As we have seen in previous articles, the tanners are not happy with this, but they will have to toe the line if they want to sell to a certain type of customer.

Another challenge is how to set the rules in a uniform, responsible and unequivocal way without overdoing it. Lanxess started this type of process last year for the use of chemicals in leather. The company held a very successful seminar with various industry stakeholders to educate representatives of major brands about leather chemicals and to help tanners understand why brands make certain demands.

The most convincing method is dialogue combined with commercial encouragement. 🌐