

# Rethinking Animal Welfare Briefing Notes

**29th February 2024**

**For further information on this past workshop, such as the video, please visit-**

[Rethinking Animal Welfare — CRILS - Critical Research on Industrial Livestock Systems](#)

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## High-level summary

Advocating for animal welfare to reform or challenge industrial livestock systems requires localised and adaptable strategies that engage a wide range of actors, from farm workers and retailers to children coming to terms with the ethics of eating animals. Bidirectional knowledge exchange between European and African contexts can increase the chance of success. Animal welfare advancements in East Africa's rapidly expanding industrial animal farming sectors need to be Africa-led.

This second CRILS online workshop was co-organised by Prof. Christine Nicol (Royal Veterinary College), Judy Muriithi (Lawyers for Animal Protection, Africa) and Dr Victor Yamo (International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI)). The group of academic, non-academic and mixed-background participants (48 in total) described themselves variably as researchers, campaigners, and an agroecological advocate, anthropologist, and animal lover among other terms. See Figures 1-4 below. Their work was often global or regional in nature and focussed on a wide range of countries including the UK, Nigeria, Egypt, and India. Half the presentation audience stayed for the in-depth breakout room discussions where participants could take a deep dive into questions with the co-organisers afterwards.

Figures 1-4: Online workshop participants' characteristics

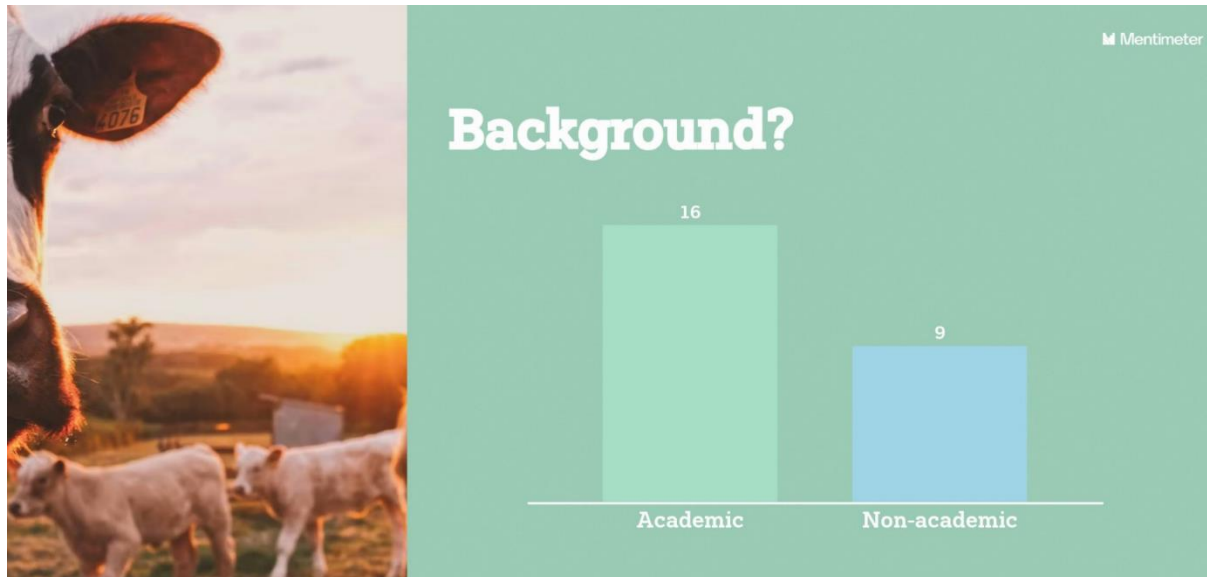


Figure 1: What is your professional background? (Mentimeter polling of online workshop participants)

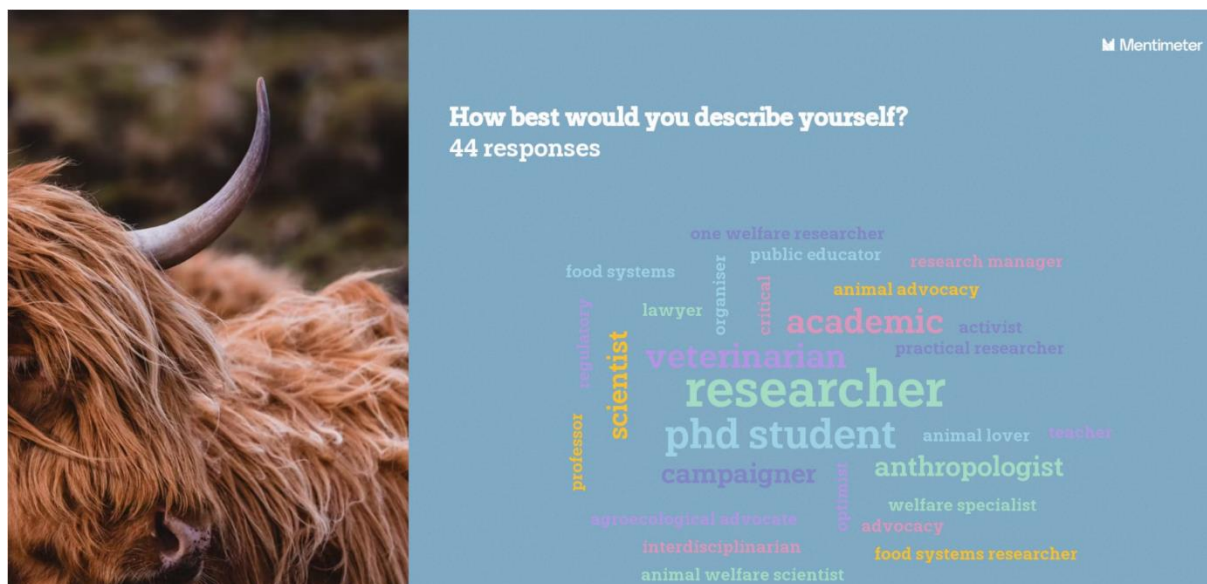


Figure 2: How best would you describe yourself? (Mentimeter polling of online workshop participants)



## Presentations by Prof Christine Nicol, Judy Muriithi and Dr Victor Yamo

Prof. Christine Nicol kicked off the workshop by probing sticky questions she has grappled over her decades long career as an animal welfare scientist with an interest in translating academic research into policy, expert-witness work, and public engagement. When Nicol started her career, animal welfare was still a fringe topic, only just starting to edge its way into policy agendas in the EU. As an early-career researcher, it was generally contested whether or not scientists should even play a role in policy. As a scientist approaching policy change, she highlighted the importance and challenges of finding convergent values and priorities among producers, government officials, consumers, and academic scientists, stressing the value of experiencing first-hand the working conditions on farms in order to understand the slow nature of progress. Individual farmers seldom have the resources and capacity to adopt the animal welfare recommendations set by scientists. However, industry at large also pushes back on reform through delaying tactics, misuse of science, and a threat-oriented mindset which obscures possible opportunities or benefits of reform. Referencing her experience with a movement to ban caged animal farming in the EU, Nicol outlined how a lengthy process has now stalled. Starting with a petition in 2020, which triggered a parliamentary vote and subsequent legal revisions and scientific inputs, the motion is currently stalled for further consultation on costs and transition periods, in response to industry lobby groups<sup>1</sup>.

She closed her presentation by encouraging younger academics to take any opportunity, no matter how small, to engage with policy to gain a deeper understanding of how evidence is used in policy. Often the critical problems are slow-moving, unpredictable and can be approached by tackling smaller, seemingly mundane policy changes. This is in contrast to the more esoteric intellectual problems that academics are incentivised to pursue.

On behalf of himself and Judy Muriithi, Dr Victor Yamo presented their work to understand the drivers of on-farm animal welfare in East Africa, drawing on experience with corporate engagement and research on changing consumer perceptions. Yamo described how Africa's livestock systems are intensifying and expanding at an unprecedented pace, justified by projected increases in consumption with population growth, wealth and urbanisation. He cautioned that animal welfare regulations may not be keeping up with the pace of expansion, nor in fact with consumer preferences. According to an East African Consumer Perception Survey (2020, ILRI), consumers are concerned about the animal welfare, environmental and public health risks posed by animal food production and consumption and expressed a willingness to purchase more food if animal production was 'animal welfare friendly', 'environmentally friendly' and antibiotic free. Consumer choice is one part of the drivers of on-farm animal welfare, which include investor concerns, regulatory requirements, and public food scandals. In describing this, Yamo mentioned how stringent regulations over animal production and retail in the Global North can result in the dumping of inputs, such as antimicrobials,

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<sup>1</sup> Read about the parliamentary proceedings here: [https://citizens-initiative.europa.eu/initiatives/details/2018/000004/end-cage-age\\_en](https://citizens-initiative.europa.eu/initiatives/details/2018/000004/end-cage-age_en)

and high-risk production styles in the Global South, where policies regulating industrial production are still in process or continue to be hampered by industry-interests. Yamo identifies corporate engagement with large-scale poultry producers and retailers as a strategy for integrated change across investors, intergovernmental agencies, and standards and certification agencies.

## Breakout Room Discussions

We then moved into smaller breakout sessions to discuss questions shared by the workshop co-organisers and presenters.

### What does animal welfare mean to you?

The discussions started on a personal note, probing what animal welfare means in different contexts, cultures, and geographies but evolved into a broader discussion on the political nature of animal welfare in science and societies. Discussions returned to Nicol's introductory slides indicating that welfare is a component of ethical treatment of animals and includes the combination of optimal health, nutritious food, and clean water. It was recognised that the term welfare can however be abused by companies who recognise its value in consumer choice. It is important to validate the source and definition of 'animal welfare' when used by different actors.

What does welfare mean and why do we pursue it? One point of contention was the relationship between animal ethics, liberation, equity, justice and animal welfare. Animal ethics address philosophical questions of moral acceptability, of whether we ought to do something to animals. This is interpreted differently based on culture, personal preference, and politics. This can be pursued through utilitarian philosophies, such as Peter Singer's Animal Liberation, which describes how animals deserve equal consideration to humans but not equal treatment when calculating the balance between harm reduction and benefit. Animal welfare is the science that addresses how we ought to do something, once we have decided that it is morally acceptable. This science influences both people's ethical positions and the legal frameworks to implement welfare practices. Animal rights exist on a scale of ethical decisions from abolitionist-informed justice theory that believe animals should not be instrumentalised; through to welfare theory which accepts that animals are used and seeks to minimise harm. In the context of animals, the ethical principle of justice is relational – how we treat animals is inscribed by the closeness and nature of human relationship with, and our estimation of their intellectual capacity and ability to feel pain of a species of animal.

Animal welfare is by no means a novel concept. One participant offered the term *Ahimsa*, which is shared by Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism to describe non-violence. This attitude undergirded the social movements that led the first animal cruelty protection act in India. However, it was also argued that current framings of animal welfare are anthropocentric in that they seek to achieve animal welfare in order to improve productivity, food safety, and public health for humans only but not for animals in and of their own right. This linked to a broader discussion on the possibility of adopting a more eco-centric vision of animal welfare. According to some, perceptions of animal

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welfare among the public were still limited to animals used in laboratory experiments and the importance of protecting welfare of farmed animals has yet to be adequately recognised.

The long-term contribution of reforms to animal welfare – whether human- or eco-centric- as a route to systemic change was put into question when it was reframed as an defeatist agenda. For example in the United States, where a vast quantity of animals are produced by a very small number of farms that are nearly completely industrialised, animal welfare is a largely academic pursuit that is resigned to the belief that systems cannot be fundamentally changed and instead pursues small gains. It was suggested that the interrelations between animal and worker welfare cannot be ignored. Welfare could instead be regarded through interdisciplinary and systems-thinking approach as part of a wider agenda for collective effort to reduce the intensity, brutality and scale of industrial farming overall – including for workers’ - to target multiple leverage points. This suggestion flipped the issue on its head to propose that the issue is not on-farm welfare which can be improved through a series of minor changes to animal conditions; but rather that intensification and industrialisation of the system itself has damaging effects, of which harms to animal welfare are one outcome.

**Do farm animal welfare regulations tend to favour large-scale farmed animal production over non-industrial systems?**

After establishing how people perceive and feel about animal welfare, which turned out to be a thorny issue, discussions moved on to address the specific relationships between scale and welfare. This question was intended to unpack whether regulations, which may be pursued with good intentions for farmers but in reality are costly and time-consuming, may end up increasing the resource burden on farmers. Overburdening farmers can in turn preferentially select for larger-scale industries who have larger amounts of available or access to private and public investments to implement the recommended changes. Private and public investments were credited with playing a significant role in a process of scaling up to implement animal welfare by including welfare standards in their investment portfolio requirements. Welfare is increasingly included on investment priorities because of a possible association between high welfare standards and increases in productivity, and because of growing consumer demand for welfare certified products. Consumer demand is also being met by certification schemes, who are intended to hold hypermarket retail chains to account to source livestock from farms with high welfare standards. The example of Chicken Watch ranking report was given (link available below).

This discussion also drove participants to discuss the troubled distinction between large- and small-scale farming. Farming practices exist on a continuum and are perceived differently depending on the extent of industrialisation in that context. Acknowledging this blurred definition, the link between welfare regulations was not perceived to be definitive. One participant suggested that higher welfare standards in large companies can influence livestock farming practices more broadly by setting higher welfare standards for smaller players in the industry to achieve. It was argued that there did not seem to be an association between higher welfare standards and scaling up production. For

example, in Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa, where small-scale farmers are predominantly Black, where farmers are adopting welfare practices to satisfy consumer demand but do not have access to capital to pursue industrialisation. A contradictory example of Egypt was given, where livestock production is rapidly expanding and scaling up without compliance to welfare recommendations.

Exploring the possibility of bi-directional learning between European contexts, as outlined by Nicol's presentation, and the East African contexts, as outlined by Muriithi and Yamo's, highlighted the challenges in direct comparisons across regions based on economic, political and climatic differences.

A large proportion of livestock producers in African countries are small-scale and governments may still prioritise their livelihoods and contribution to food provisioning over the expansion of industrial farms. In Tanzania, for example, large-scale industrialised farms were perceived as uncommon and relatively new. Global North countries who can purchase and produce more than they need for their populations may be in a privileged position to advocate for animal welfare. Governments of African countries are more concerned about climate change, public health and nutrition, and economic progress. The public recognises that animal welfare is important, but relative to greater social needs, it is delayed. Political narratives of securing population health and nutrition through industrial animal agriculture are growing because industrial animal agriculture practices are bolstered by foreign investments, signal development to the public, and are seen to bring in short-term wealth. When the priority is productivity and sector growth, welfare lags behind.

In some groups, this led to a discussion on how to challenge the dominant scarcity narrative and instead pursue integrated welfare, economic livelihood and ecological agendas. There is evidence that we have plenty food to feed a growing population; this issue is how and where it is produced, distributed, and consumed. The political nature of divergent norms for animal welfare standards between the Global North and South was highlighted by a reflection that products that do not meet supermarket and consumer welfare standards in the Global North (e.g. cage-farmed chickens) are then dumped in the Global South, discrediting local consumer demand and influencing the price and value of local production. Movements for welfare in industries in the Global South must be locally-driven. Importing welfare visions from Europe to African countries may fall short for multiple reasons. One reason is global heating, which may incur new welfare issues for example by increasing bird mortality of outdoor, free-range poultry by exposing birds to extreme heat. These birds may well be safer in indoor, well-ventilated farms or even cages, but this vision conflicts from commonly held ideals of a bucolic rural idyll with birds roaming outside.

### **What routes are available to concerned citizens or consumers to challenge harmful industrial livestock practices in collaboration with academics?**

Ending the discussion with an opportunity to share effective strategies and tactics for improving animal welfare on the ground, we moved on to discuss how a diverse range of actors can get involved. Bi-directional learning across Global South and North contexts is challenging and demands an

acceptance of plurality and locally-divergent strategies. Questions of land access and land clearance, for example, will play a huge role in the form of industrial animal agriculture expansion on the one hand, and routes available to advocate for change on the other. Some participants argued that to achieve impact at scale, pressure should be applied to large-scale farms to improve on-farm welfare standards but not small-scale farms who rely on mixed practices. Experiences of working with retail chains and large-scale farms in East Africa to certify farm products as high welfare was given as testimony for how effective corporate engagement driven by consumer demand can be. Contrastingly, it was also suggested that there is power in numbers and diversity: to achieve the necessary momentum for change, actors from multiple perspectives need to be brought together in holistic collaboration, including small-scale farmers and other industry professionals. Bringing actors together in conversation was seen as an iterative and dynamic process to form coherence, not a means to a prescribed end. Consumer led advocacy is important but to achieve this we need to tackle cognitive dissonance as a self-protective mechanism. A participant noted that consumers do not make choices based on what classical economics perceives as rational decisions; purchasing choice is infinitely complicated. Making ethical decisions to push for industry change is not only driven by greater access to information or choice.

Participants returned to a debate on the contested role of scientists and their relationships with farmers, government, and agri-business in advocating for animal welfare. On the one hand, scientists were argued as playing a crucial role because scientific evidence is recognised as legitimate and valid evidence in the courts systems and policy procedures. This evidence should be diverse and support farmers who are committed to animal welfare but who might not have the means to uphold the regulations. On the other hand, animal welfare scientists were seen to perpetuate a defeatist narrative in which systemic change is elusive, and welfare remains an abstract idea but not an on-farm reality. However, the influence of corporate lobbying has a long legacy of outweighing the influence of scientific evidence. Trust in and the validity of scientific evidence is tarnished by the extent of industry-funded research. Lobbying powers have built in mechanisms for corporations to effect change in policy systems in the UK and the USA, as well as elsewhere. Scientists at a remove from agri-business (who are not dependent on industry funding) but who are directly involved with on-farm activities were suggested as being better positioned to advocate for welfare. Scientists were also encouraged to produce short and punchy reports, or translate findings into policy briefs and other communications that are easily accessible and legible to a wide audience to improve the reach and relevance of their research and to counter the universality of industry-funded work.

Animal welfare is intrinsically linked with complex moral debates on our relationship to animals and with legal decisions that dictate policy recommendations and implementation. To achieve welfare as part of a holistic intervention in improving animal farming practices and food systems, we need to integrate efforts across different stakeholders. This workshop and subsequent discussions focussed on how academics can better work with non-academics, including farmers, retailers, policy makers, and civil campaigning groups to achieve this. To avoid perpetuating a dynamic in



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which scientists are seen to direct farmers and thus reinforce knowledge hierarchies, scientists and researchers should build bi-directional relationships with farmers and farm workers to find a shared agenda that improves farmers' economic stability, and reduces farming's ecological, social and cultural externalities in conjunction with improving animal welfare. For this to be effective, some participants offered that there also needs to be an dismantling of existing power dynamics to level the playing field between small-scale and large-scale agri-business; academics and farmers; workers and business managers; and between academic disciplines.

**Links shared or resources mentioned by participants**

1. Human League, Open Wing Alliance's [Africa Ranking Report](#) ranks companies leading the way on animal welfare
  - a. <https://thehumaneleague.org/article/2023-africa-ranking-report>
2. [Chicken Watch](#): Online database of changes companies are implementing to improve poultry welfare.
  - a. <https://chickenwatch.org/progress-tracker/>
3. [Organizations - Open Wing Alliance](#) Initiated by the Humane League, this coalition shares campaign strategies, tactics and resources to advocate for cage-free farming.
  - a. <https://openwingalliance.org/organizations>
4. Peter Singer, (2023) Animal Liberation Now. [Animal Liberation Now | Peter Singer | London Review Bookshop](#)

If you'd like to share any additional resources, please add them here, <https://forms.gle/N5ehzENJiNCqwNJ49>.

To ensure that participants feel safe to contribute openly and freely to ongoing conversations, CRILS has kept all comments anonymous. If you would like to comment on anything discussed, we encourage you to email [CRILSNetwork@rvc.ac.uk](mailto:CRILSNetwork@rvc.ac.uk).