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Title: The relative importance of pig welfare in seven European Countries

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Abstract

Animal welfare is becoming a prominent politically sensitive matter because of the continuous societal pressure for more humane production systems. The European society is demanding products with high animal welfare standards and requiring animals to be raised as closely as possible to their natural conditions. However, people are still considered uninformed and unfamiliar with the different farm production systems. In this context, the pig welfare has received special attention from the European authorities by approving unceasingly different regulations changes. The aim of this study is: a) To identify the relative importance of pig welfare within the different animal production systems, b) to understand the animal welfare concept and to identify the level of information, c) to analyse the different aspects regulated by the animal welfare rules.

Data were collected in seven European countries (Spain, Italy, Greece, Lithuania, United Kingdom, Poland and Sweden) from a sample stratified by gender and age using different face to face semi-structured questionnaires carried out for 4 groups of participants: Consumers (250 by country), citizens (250 by country), university students (250 by country) and secondary school students (250 by country).

The preliminary results showed that participants were more concerned with the pig welfare than the laying hens/broilers, milk cows/beef and goats/sheep production systems. Furthermore, participants revealed the need to have more information on animal welfare and how animals are raised showing a high level of heterogeneous information source by participants' groups and countries. Italy, Spain, Greece and Romania exhibited the lowest level of information about animal welfare, while United Kingdom, Poland Lithuania and Sweden showed the highest values.

The aspects "clean and healthy housing environment" and "natural outdoor conditions" were the most important factors that describe the animal welfare concept in almost all the studied countries. Italy, Greece, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden highlighted the importance of the "feeding" aspect in describing the animal welfare concept while in Spain was the "suffering" aspect. Results showed that in all the studied countries the "emotion" aspect received the lowest relevance for describing animal welfare. Finally, results suggest the need for a better understanding of societal preferences for food produced under varying conditions with respect to animal well-being.