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Aug 24, 2022 **The United Nations, Animal Welfare and the Environment**

By Andrew Rowan, DPhil and Kathleen Rowan CEO, WellBeing International

Introduction

A sustainable global future requires the world to address the well-being of not only people but animals and the environment. This view is also the founding premise for WellBeing International (WBI). A one-minute [video](#) produced by WBI includes the following message. “A responsible caretaker of our world must safeguard people, animals, and the environment for each element is tightly connected and depends on the well-being of the others.”

WBI is encouraged by the recent resolution on the nexus between the well-being of people, animals, and the environment passed at the fifth United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-5). However, considerable effort will still be needed to ensure that the requested report on the nexus between animal welfare-environment-sustainable development is comprehensive. Furthermore, the report’s findings should influence and be integrated with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) work plan and the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Earlier Efforts to Promote Animal Welfare Concerns at the UN and Other Transnational Agencies

The recent UNEA-5 resolution is not the first transnational initiative promoting consideration of animal welfare. A successful earlier initiative is the development and acceptance (in 2017) of a [Global Animal Welfare Strategy](#) by the World Organization for Animal Health (WOAH, previously known as the OIE). While WOAH is not part of the UN system, it has established agreements with several UN specialized agencies (e.g., the FAO). The WOAH 2017 strategy also emphasizes the importance of animal welfare for human and environmental well-being. In an opening section, WOAH’s 2017 animal welfare strategy states, “Animal welfare is closely linked to animal health, the health and well-being of people, and the sustainability of socio-economic and ecological systems.”

Despite these stated “close links,” animal welfare (or well-being) is not incorporated into nor addressed by the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, even though two of the goals focus on animals in water (SDG 14) and animals on land (SDG 15). The SDGs are written from a strongly anthropocentric perspective. The exclusion of animal well-being is not the only SDG deficit. The SDGs also tend to encourage siloed thinking, hampering the consistent consideration

and integration of upper-level cross-cutting themes such as the well-being of people, animals, and the environment. In addition, while the economist Sir Partha Dasgupta lauds the SDGs as a remarkable global achievement, he notes that nobody has yet demonstrated that they are, in fact, sustainable.

UNEA-5 Resolution on Animal Welfare

According to its website, the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA), a UN program, is the “world’s highest-level decision-making body on the environment.” A resolution on animal welfare, led by Ghana and supported by six other countries (Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan, Senegal, and South Sudan), was passed by consensus at UNEA-5. The resolution calls on the Executive Director of UNEP to collaborate with other UN entities (e.g., the FAO and WHO) to produce a report, subject to the availability of financial and human resources, on the nexus between animal welfare, the environment, and sustainable development. The resolution further states that this report should be presented to UNEA-6 in 2024. The preamble to the resolution also noted that animal welfare can contribute to addressing environmental challenges and achieving the SDGs and specifically directs the Executive Director of UNEP to consider the UN Secretary-General’s landmark report on “[harmony with nature](#).”

The UNEA-5 resolution originated from a proposal by participants at the 3rd African Animal Welfare Conference in Addis Ababa in 2019, hosted by the Africa Network for Animal Welfare (ANAW), the African Union Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources (AU-IBAR), UNEP, and the government of Ethiopia. After this meeting, the World Federation for Animals (WFA), ANAW, and other animal NGOs launched the successful initiative to support a group of UNEP member states to bring forward the animal welfare resolution for consideration at UNEA-5.

Animal Welfare at the UN General Assembly

Another attempt to engage the UN on animal welfare is the Universal Declaration on Animal Welfare (UDAW) [initiative](#) officially launched in June 2000 by the World Society for the Protection of Animals (now World Animal Protection). While World Animal Protection has collected several million signatures of support for the Declaration from around the globe, significant progress has not been made in persuading the UN General Assembly to accept the UDAW.

A justified sense of optimism to the heightened attention to the well-being of animals and the environment is due to two events. The first event was the passage of the animal welfare resolution at UNEA-5. The second event was the 2020 [Harmony with Nature](#) report submitted to the UN General Assembly on July 28, 2020, by the UN Secretary-General. In this report, the UN Secretary-General urged a paradigm shift “from a human-centered to an Earth-centered society in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” The Secretary-General also stated, “A first step to recognizing the rights of Nature is the recognition that animals are sentient beings, not merely property, and must be afforded respect and legal recognition.”

The UN General Assembly holds periodic meetings of the [High-Level Political Forum \(HLPF\)](#), where progress on the SDGs is discussed. Civil society organizations have opportunities to contribute to SDG discussions, and animal organizations have been included since 2017 under the Animal Issues Thematic Cluster (AITC). WFA (and its predecessor, World Animal Net) has been involved in AITC from the beginning and is listed together with Born Free and Compassion in World Farming as one of the three leaders of the Cluster.

The Future

The prospects for the potential of meaningful attention to animal welfare at UN agencies have never looked more promising. One avenue of action suggests that advocates should argue for an 18th SDG on Animal Welfare. This action would ensure the animal welfare issue receives the recognition it deserves. However, an 18th SDG would probably encounter the same challenges regarding the integration of animal welfare across the other 17 SDGs. The world’s sustainability challenges are complex, and potential solutions will require the application of multi-disciplinary

thinking, including consistently integrating human, animal, and environmental well-being targets across all the SDGs. WBI suggests we might also look to the [One Health](#) and [One Welfare](#) concepts that emphasize upper-level and overarching visions emphasizing the fundamental interconnections between the well-being of people, animals, and the environment.

