

Labeling animal welfare, empowering citizens' ethics

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Food has increasingly become a "knowledge-dependent" issue. This implies that access to relevant information is a key concern, which also has ethical implications.

Labeling is one of the most effective communication channels in the marketplace, in line with the concepts of traceability, transparency and informed choice. Improving labeling may enable consumers to restore and develop more meaningful relations with food, also allowing consumers' ethics to emerge. This goal can be achieved by developing the concept of *ethics traceability* as the basis for consumers' informed food choices.

With reference to foods of animal origin, labeling is usually connected to safety and health-related issues. However, it can also offer an effective way of addressing and communicating ethical concerns arising from current food production practices. In fact, providing consumers with information about the animal farming systems may prove crucial in enhancing awareness about animal distress and in promoting technological change towards more welfare-friendly forms of husbandry. Most consumers completely ignore how farm animals are raised in contemporary agriculture. The possibility to inform consumers about animals' lives in food production transforms labeling into a powerful ethical device.

Labeling of animal foods is now under consideration by the European Union. And as ethics has been framed in the EU as an essential component of European citizenship, animal welfare labeling is no longer just a matter of ethical consumption, but it has also become a matter of citizenship.

Leaving citizens uninformed about the reality of animal farming and the supply chain implies a lack of transparency and also limits individuals' rights to choose 'animal-friendly' products. Implementing ethical traceability and informed food choices entails creating a new kind of civil society, composed by 'ethically competent' citizens/consumers.

Though the effectiveness of the labeling system may vary among Member States, and also among different national cultures, level of health literacy, socio-economic status, and ethical sensibility, still more information may lead to more commitment toward animal welfare.

Increasing transparency and providing more information about the lives of farm animals in the form of food labels does not necessarily imply that consumers will be competent enough or even inclined to accept this responsibility. Information on the label has a chance of reaching the average consumer. The challenge is to reach more and more significant numbers of consumers who care enough about animal welfare to look at a label. The first step is to design a food label that provides the maximum amount of useful animal-welfare information, disclosing some concrete and pertinent information about underlying animal-treatment practices.

In conclusion, it seems appropriate to emphasize that labeling can be a powerful, democratic way to inform consumers about animal welfare credentials for animal products.