

POLICY BRIEFING


Animal Welfare, Trade Policy & Sustainable Development Goals



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1.

INTRODUCTION

Improving animal welfare is an essential element of sustainable food and production systems. With its impact on resources, the environment, food security and public health, the future of livestock and working animals' welfare remains central for EU and global politics. A 2023 Eurobarometer survey highlighted the concern of European citizens, showing that 84% believe the welfare of farm animals should be protected better.¹

This report explores the connections and approaches for engaging with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the EU's trade agenda and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) for advancing animal welfare in the EU and globally. This report builds on Eurogroup for Animals policy brief on trade and the SDGs from 2019.² Since then, many changes have occurred in EU and global politics. Therefore, this report provides a timely update and outlook.

Livestock in industrialised production systems are particularly subjected to low welfare standards, with impacts on animal and human health, as well as the environment. Intensive livestock farming increases pollution levels in water and soil, deforestation rates and GHG emissions. The climate and livelihoods can be protected in production systems with higher animal welfare conditions.

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development describes this ambition for a world in which nature and humanity live in harmony. Adopted in 2015, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and indicators provide a framework for sustainable development. Improving animal welfare can contribute to achieving numerous SDGs, but it is not anchored in the SDG indicators. With only 18% of the targets on track to be achieved by 2030, the first section of the report highlights the connections between animal welfare and the SDGs, and the opportunities to strengthen them.

In an interconnected world, international trade plays a key role in meeting the demands of consumers for animal products. At the same time, this trade can hamper the achievement of the SDGs in producer countries. The environmental and social impacts of intensive livestock farming, including animal suffering, are outsourced, or spill over, from high-income countries to regions where less stringent regulations create a cheaper end-product. The avenues to minimise negative spillovers and maximise

animal welfare are explored in this report, including through the World Trade Organisation as the global body for international trade rules, and the negotiations of bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs).

In 2021, the EU published its latest trade strategy, "An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy", built on its former "Trade for All" from 2015. This strategy further embeds the EU sustainability agenda, including its approach to the SDGs, into its trade policy. At the same time, it leaves room for adapting to trading partners' realities, while making choices to shape its trade connections through engagement and leadership. The EU's early review of Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD) approach, "The power of trade partnerships: together for green and just economic growth", published in June 2022, solidified the ambition to pursue sustainable trade agreements. Both reference the need to transition to a sustainable food system. *Eurogroup for Animals believes that using trade agreements and trade instruments to promote higher animal welfare standards in third countries contributes to that objective.*

The SDGs have also come more into focus at the WTO, based on the links between trade and global sustainability. In the last years, the WTO launched several initiatives which opened the doors for exchanges among its members. In 2020, a new discussion forum was established, the Trade and Environmental Sustainability Structured Discussions, with dedicated working groups connecting trade with, for instance, climate measures. Nevertheless, animal welfare issues are not in the scope of environmental dialogues at the WTO. This is rather governed under agreements related to human, animal and plant health. Such agreements were strengthened in 2022, explicitly linking food security and sustainable food systems. The following section provides an overview of the links between animal welfare and the SDGs.

¹ European Commission (2023), *Attitudes of Europeans towards animal welfare*. [Link](#).

² Eurogroup for Animals (2019), *Animal Welfare, Trade and Sustainable Development Goals*. [Link](#).

2.

ANIMAL WELFARE AND THE SDGs



Through the ‘One Health’ approach, the EU strives for an integrated approach to ‘sustainably balance and optimise the health of people, animals and ecosystems’, recognising that all health issues are connected – including infectious diseases such as COVID-19 (see Box 2).³ Within the EU, the agenda recently gained joint support from five EU agencies in a joint framework for a strong scientific evidence base and enhanced cross-agency action.⁴ The concept of ‘One Welfare’, first introduced in 2013, further extends the One Health approach to go beyond health and towards a coordinated effort on animal welfare, human wellbeing and environmental health.⁵

Within a globalised economy, decisions on welfare in one country have repercussions beyond these borders on wildlife habitats, land use, food cost, etc., and should therefore be addressed in an interdisciplinary way.⁶ Through a new initiative, the European Partnership on Animal Health and Welfare, the European Commission expects an investment of EUR 350 million to boost research providing solutions for sustainable, healthy and environmentally friendly livestock, poultry and aquaculture production – with direct ties to the European Green Deal.

The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development contains 17 Sustainable Development Goals, and aims for a world in which nature, including animals, can live in harmony with humanity, making animal welfare integral to sustainable development. While the indicators for measuring the progress of the SDGs often do not correspond directly to animal welfare issues, several are connected or cannot be achieved without animal welfare. As the SDGs are interlinked, the One Welfare approach is key for SDG progress. The world only has a few years left to deliver on the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Climate Agreement. Worldwide, only 18% of all SDG targets are on track; not one SDG is achieved, and none are fully on track to be achieved on time.⁷

Important advances have been made. However, progress is impeded by geopolitical tension, conflicts, and climate change. One major disruptor of the last years was the COVID-19 pandemic and the severe socio-economic impacts following global lockdowns.

This section of the report highlights the impact of industrial animal agriculture on the progress of the SDGs, as well as the impact that working animals can have on achieving several SDGs. Out of the SDGs detailed in this report, six are facing significant challenges and are mostly stagnating (SDGs on poverty, education, gender equality, water, decent work, and climate action) and four face major challenges (food security, health, life below water, and life on land).⁸

³ European Commission (n.d.), *What is the One Health approach?* [Link](#).

⁴ European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (2024), *Cross-agency One Health task force framework for action*. [Link](#). The five agencies are the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA), the European Environment Agency (EEA), the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA).

⁵ One Welfare (n.d.), *About one welfare*. [Link](#).

⁶ Coonius, T.J. and Earley, R.W. (2013), *One welfare: a call to develop a broader framework of thought and action*. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*. [Link](#).

⁷ United Nations (2025), *The Sustainable Development Goals Report*. [Link](#).

⁸ Sachs, J.D. et.al. (2025), *Financing Sustainable Development to 2030 and Mid-Century, Sustainable Development Report 2025*. [Link](#).



SGD 1 END POVERTY

Despite a steady decline in global poverty since the 1990s, around 10% of the global population still lives in extreme poverty.⁹ Sub-Saharan Africa continues to experience the highest extreme poverty rates, particularly in Eastern and Southern subregions.

Livestock plays a crucial economic role, supporting the livelihoods of approximately 1.7 billion people living in poverty.¹⁰ Improving animal welfare by investing in small-scale livestock farming presents a significant opportunity to reduce poverty, enhance livelihoods, and accelerate progress towards achieving SDG 1. As highlighted by the President of the UN's International Fund for Agricultural Development, "Now is the time to invest at scale in Africa's small-scale food producers – the backbone of Africa's food security and development".¹¹

⁹ World Bank (2025), *Poverty and Inequality Platform*. [Link](#).

¹⁰ FAO (2023), *Achieving SDG2 without breaching the 1.5C threshold: A global roadmap*. [Link](#).

¹¹ IFAD (2024), *IFAD President at G7: Bigger and smarter investments in small-scale agriculture are key to build a prosperous Africa*. [Link](#).

¹² Eurostat (2025), *Farm indicators by legal status of the holding, utilised agricultural area, type and economic size of the farm and NUTS2 region*. [Link](#).

¹³ Boccaletti, S., Maranzano, P. and Viegas, M. (2024), *Inequality and concentration in farmland production and size: regional analysis for the European Union from 2010 to 2020*. [Link](#).

SDG 1.4

Ensure the poor and the vulnerable have equal rights to economic resources, as well as ownership and control over land and natural resources

Proper access to land and natural resources is central to ending poverty. However, recent trends in industrial animal agriculture show a shift in land use. According to Eurostat,¹² the number of farms in Europe fell from around 12 million in 2010 to just over 9 million in 2020, while overall agricultural output increased by 56 billion euros. This indicates the expansion of industrial animal agriculture and a shift towards fewer but larger farms across most EU countries between 1990 and 2020.¹³ Such industrialisation has had significant consequences for rural communities. Mechanisation and efficiency improvements have led to widespread job losses and made it increasingly difficult for small farms to remain viable. As a result, land abandonment, the erosion of local entrepreneurship and the loss of rural identity have been a pressing issue. Moreover, decision-making power has increasingly shifted away from local communities, exacerbating economic and social inequality. Improved animal welfare within rural farming systems can help mitigate these issues. Healthy livestock can lower production costs, open access to new markets and strengthen the economic sustainability of small-scale farms.

In rural areas, particularly across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, working animals such as donkeys, horses, and mules are essential to daily life. They provide not only financial value through income generation but also serve as physical assets used for transport and operating agricultural tools. Improved welfare through access to better nutrition, veterinary care, and working conditions extends the working life of these animals but also directly enhances the income of their owners. However, the growing demand for donkey skins used in traditional Chinese medicine poses a significant threat. Approximately six million donkeys are slaughtered annually, which has financial impacts on rural households.¹⁴ Families lose up to 73% of their household income after their donkeys are stolen and sold. Recognising this crisis, the African Union in 2024 introduced a moratorium on the slaughter of donkeys for their skin. It also launched the "Pan-African Strategy for the Preservation, Welfare, and Sustainable Utilisation of Donkeys in Africa",¹⁵ which acknowledges the socio-economic importance of donkeys and the need for their protection to support rural development. Achieving SDG 1 requires not just economic investment in people but also a commitment to safeguard the animals they rely on.

¹⁴ The Donkey Sanctuary (2025), *Stolen donkeys, stolen futures: The impact of ejiao on Africa's women and children*. [Link](#).

¹⁵ African Union Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources (2025), *Advancing donkey welfare Africa roadmap*. [Link](#).



SDG 2 ZERO HUNGER

Feeding animals in intensive farming systems requires large amounts of feed and vast areas of land, diverting grains from human consumption to livestock. Currently, 77% of the world's cultivated land is used to feed livestock, which provides only 17% of global calories and 33% of global protein. In contrast, the remaining 23% of cultivated land produces food that supplies 83% of the world's calories and 67% of its protein.¹⁶

A recent study by the FAO indicates that livestock production is increasing, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, thereby increasing the area of land needed.¹⁷ Projections estimate that by 2034, 40% of all cereals will be directly consumed by humans, while 33% will be used as animal feed.¹⁸ This rising demand puts additional pressure on agricultural systems, which are already vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. More frequent droughts, floods, and heatwaves are expected to further challenge both crop and livestock production.

To achieve the different targets under SDG 2, farming systems must adopt higher animal welfare standards through investments alongside sustainable and resilient agricultural practices.

¹⁶ Hannah Ritchie, Pablo Rosado, and Max Roser (2022), *Crop Yields*. [Link](#).

¹⁷ FAO (2022), *More Fuel for the Food/Feed Debate*. [Link](#).

¹⁸ OECD/FAO (2025), *OECD-FAO Agricultural Outlook 2025-2034*. [Link](#).

SDG 2.3

By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers

In the African drylands, 268 million pastoralists rely on domestic and international livestock trade networks for income and to obtain goods that their livestock cannot produce.¹⁹ According to the African Union, this sector contributes between 10-44% of the gross domestic product in various African countries.²⁰ Many pastoralists make decisions based on indigenous knowledge and word of mouth, which, in the face of increasingly unpredictable weather patterns, is not always reliable. Increased frequency of extreme weather events can cause significant economic losses for families who depend entirely on their herds. For instance, the 2016-2017 droughts in Somalia led to widespread crop failures and livestock deaths, pushing the country to the brink of famine.²¹ Improving access to technology could help mitigate such impacts by increasing yields and reducing economic loss.²² Mobile apps are available that provide information on weather and forage conditions. These tools enhance resilience to extreme weather events by warning them when to sell livestock in the face of drought, or by reminding them to vaccinate animals during the rainy season to prevent diseases like Rift Valley Fever.

Agroecological practices and improved animal welfare provide a sustainable path to increased agricultural productivity, without the need for industrialisation. A recent meta-analysis showed that, on average, 39% of agroecological practices outperformed monocultures in terms of yield in Africa.²³ These methods also reduce reliance on chemical pesticides and improve soil health over time. Additionally, enhanced veterinary services for working animals can further enhance productivity, particularly for small-scale farmers. In Senegal, owning a working equine is associated with 78% more groundnut production, 46% more maize and 45% more millet.²⁴

¹⁹ FAO (2018), *Pastoralism in Africa's drylands*. [Link](#).

²⁰ African Union (2010), *Policy framework for pastoralism in Africa: Securing, protecting and improving the lives, livelihoods and rights of pastoral communities*. [Link](#).

²¹ Ahmed, A. H., & Ali, I. I. (2024), *The Impact of Drought on Food Security in Somalia: A Comprehensive Review*. *Curr Res Env Sci Eco Letters*. [Link](#).

²² GIZ (2021), *Digitalizing the African livestock sector*. [Link](#).

²³ Romero Antonio, M.E., Faye, A., Betancur-Corredor, B. et al. (2025), *Productivity effects of agroecological practices in Africa: insights from a systematic review and meta-analysis*. *Food Sec*. [Link](#).

²⁴ Brooke (2018), *The economic contribution of working equids in Senegal*. [Link](#).

SDG 2.4

By 2030, ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, help maintain ecosystems and progressively improve land and soil quality

The global focus on competitiveness and industrialisation has driven the “cheaper food paradigm”: the more we produce, the cheaper food becomes, and the more we consume.²⁵ However, sustainable food systems provide an opportunity to reduce GHG emissions, prevent deforestation, and reduce soil erosion. As described in the EU Farm to Fork Strategy, a sustainable food system “can bring environmental, health and social benefits, offer economic gains and ensure that the recovery from the crisis puts us onto a sustainable path”.²⁶

Industrial animal agriculture heavily relies on crop intensification to meet feed demand. This has led to land degradation, soil erosion and deterioration, ultimately threatening food availability. Research suggests that to achieve SDG 2, a paradigm shift in our food systems is necessary.²⁷ Increasing feed production efficiency²⁸ and reducing the demand for animal products²⁹ will reduce land use and GHG emissions, while improving soil health and food security.

²⁵ Benton, T. G., Bieg, C., Harwatt, H., Pudasaini, R., & Wellesley, L. (2021). *Food system impacts on biodiversity loss: Three levers for food system transformation in support of nature*. [Link](#).

²⁶ European Commission (2020), *A Farm to Fork Strategy*. [Link](#).

²⁷ Jaisli, I., & Brunori, G. (2024), *Is there a future for livestock in a sustainable food system? Efficiency, sufficiency, and consistency strategies in the food-resource nexus*, Journal of Agriculture and Food Research. [Link](#).

²⁸ Falchetta, G., Golinucci, N., & Rocco, M. V. (2021), *Environmental and energy implications of meat consumption pathways in sub-Saharan Africa*. Sustainability. [Link](#).

²⁹ Gibson, M., Pereira, J. P., Slade, R., & Rogelj, J. (2022), *Agent-based modelling of future dairy and plant-based milk consumption for UK climate targets*, Journal of Artificial Societies and Social Simulation. [Link](#).

³⁰ Stakeholder interview on working animals took place with the Brooke, the Donkey Sanctuary and World Horse Welfare.

³¹ Rzekęć, A., Vial, C. and Bigot, G. (2020), *Green Assets of Equines in the European Context of the Ecological Transition of Agriculture, Animals*. [Link](#).

³² The Donkey Sanctuary (2025), *Donkeys in Global Trade*. [Link](#).

SDGs and Working Animals' Welfare³⁰

Owning and working with animals, such as donkeys, mules and horses, is integral to the livelihoods of communities worldwide. Although they are fundamental for assisting in agricultural activities and lessening labour burdens, as well as enabling trade and transport, their contribution is often overlooked.

Working animals contribute to several SDGs. The animals support communities in many ways: providing opportunities for additional income, employment and tourism, thereby reducing poverty (SDG 1, 8); facilitating farming, including ploughing, transport of harvest and also goods to the market (SDG 2); providing households and businesses with transport to fresh water sources (SDG 3 and 6). Their role in land management makes them a green asset, for instance, reducing soil degradation by heavy machinery and diversifying inaccessible terrain.³¹

By enabling owners to reduce manual labour, they boost economic capacity and benefit communities. Indirectly, working animals can unlock free time for accessing basic services, for schooling, and reducing unpaid work for women, as well as encouraging community groups to share welfare knowledge (SDG 4, 5, 8). Taking on the manual labour and making health services accessible through transport, working animals contribute to their owners' health (SDG 3).

Welfare interventions for working equines make their positive impact on development possible. Improved access to good, affordable harnessing, hoof care and veterinary services can empower owners to keep their animals healthy, therefore ensuring they remain productive, and improving awareness of animal welfare. An increasing issue that donkey owners face is the global, mostly illegal, trade in donkey skins, largely destined for the Chinese market, where the population of donkeys is depleting. Communities can lose their working animals through coercive sales or theft, depriving them of the benefits described above. In a study of 150 female donkey owners in Kenya, 97% experienced donkey theft, with socio-economic consequences.³²

Despite working animals' contribution to sustainable development and human health, their recognition and protection among the United Nations and governments requires further attention and collaboration. Looking beyond 2030, indicators will be key to anchoring working animals in future SDG frameworks. Since working animals are often grouped with livestock, both policymaking and data collection neglect their specific role. To support this, advanced data collection is needed to monitor and drive change.



SDG 3 ENSURE HEALTHY LIVES

To achieve SDG 3, the livestock sector can enhance the management of zoonoses, disease epidemics and antimicrobials. Animals are both a source of health (livelihoods and nutrition) and a risk to it. Intensive and high-density farming is a factor in worsening the occurrence of zoonoses (infectious animal diseases that can be naturally transmitted to humans) as well as disease epidemics. Worldwide, approximately 2.5 billion cases of illness and 2.7 million deaths a year are caused by zoonoses. EU Member States, among other regions, have experienced a recent reappearance of the Foot-and-Mouth Disease (FMD). States face high vulnerability from animal disease outbreaks such as the avian flu, which infects animals (domestic and wild) and affects those working in close contact with livestock.³³ The EU Agricultural Outlook 2024-2035 projects that the Avian flu will become a yearly issue.³⁴ Another health risk from agriculture and livestock production is air pollution and respiratory issues, particularly for those handling animals. Atmospheric ammonia (NH₃), direct or as a contributor to fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}), can cause health issues in humans, such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases.³⁵ Strategies to manage this risk include efficient feed and manure management and reducing reliance on chemical fertilisers.

Diseases flourish in industrial livestock production when animals are confined to small and overcrowded spaces. Through routine interventions with antibiotic treatments, for which industrial farming accounts for 70%, the effectiveness can decrease, causing Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR).³⁶ In the EU, the One Health Action Plan makes the connection between poor standards in livestock farming and AMR.³⁷ Between 2011 and 2022, sales of veterinary antibiotics dropped by 53%.³⁸ Globally and in the EU, AMR is a significant obstacle to achieving SDG 3, hindering proper care and infectious disease management. Several initiatives aim at reducing this obstacle. The 2024 High-Level Meeting on Antimicrobial Resistance of the United Nations produced a political declaration, specifically mentioning action on reducing antimicrobial use in agri-food chains, as well as encouraging reporting quality data and annual updates of the implementation of national action plans. The EU institutions have provided several pathways to combat AMR, including surveillance programmes (EARS-VET)³⁹ and the 2023 Council recommendations on stepping up EU actions, such as national AMR plans and increased research and innovation.⁴⁰

³³ OECD/FAO (2025), *OECD-FAO Agricultural Outlook 2025-2034*. [Link](#).

³⁴ European Commission (2024), *EU agricultural outlook, 2024-2035*. [Link](#).

³⁵ UNECE (2024), *Farming for a cleaner environment. How can I help reduce ammonia emissions from my farm?* [Link](#).

³⁶ Pegger, T. et. al. (2023), *How the EU animal welfare legislation can tackle AMR – a One Health perspective*. *Eur J Public Health*. [Link](#).

³⁷ European Food Safety Authority (2025), *The European Union summary report on antimicrobial resistance in zoonotic and indicator bacteria from humans, animals and food in 2022-2023*. [Link](#).

³⁸ European Medicines Agency (2023), *Consumption of antimicrobials in animals reaches lowest level ever in Europe*. [Link](#).

³⁹ EU-JAMRAI (n.d.), *European Antimicrobial Resistance Surveillance Network in Veterinary Medicine*.

⁴⁰ European Commission (n.d.), *EU Action on Antimicrobial Resistance*. [Link](#).

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic significantly disrupted efforts to achieve the SDGs since 2019. The livestock sector faced a fragile period, as supply chains were disrupted and both human and animal health suffered.

SDG 1+2

A combination of market closures, movement restrictions and price volatility created fragile situations, particularly for smallholders and pastoralists. This threatens global food security (affordability, accessibility of nutritious food, including animal-sourced foods). Even when food was available, disruptions in supply chains led to perishable produce (including milk and meat) being wasted.⁴¹

SDG 3

Workers' and livestock health suffered during the pandemic. Declining workers' health caused a standstill in factories (SDG 8), and the closing of slaughterhouses created backlogs on farms, leading to overcrowding, stressed livestock, and healthy animals being culled. Movement restriction created barriers to zoonotic disease surveillance, and animal welfare and veterinary services (vaccinations, treatment of diseased animals, etc.) were suspended in parts, raising the risk of various livestock diseases.⁴² Such reduced care also expanded to working animals, affecting their capacity to support transport and farm activities, which in turn affected other SDGs (no poverty, food security, work, and the ability to afford medicine). Additionally, it is important to understand the influence of wildlife and livestock interactions, climate change and habitat fragmentation on the emergence of zoonotic diseases.⁴³ In the future, resources should be guaranteed to continue adequate data collection for pandemic prevention and control.

SDG 5

Connected to SDG 8, the closure of markets (formal but especially informal ones) and extension services directly impacted women's income.

SDG 8

The pandemic further restricted the working conditions of (often already vulnerable migrant) agricultural workers, and exacerbated employment and labour issues. Global supply chains were heavily disrupted, leading to job loss and threatening livelihoods, particularly in low-income countries. Processing plants, slaughterhouses and markets were closed due to illness of staff, specifically with crowded working conditions, financially impacting the entire sector.⁴⁴ Economically, smallholder farmers were gravely impacted by the closure of local markets. Reduced sales of livestock and other products, at a lower price due to cashflow pressure, meant less income for essential goods and services.

SDG 13/15 - While transport emissions temporarily went down during the lockdowns, emissions from livestock raising remained largely unchanged (methane emissions (CH₄), ammonia (NH₃)).⁴⁵ In regions where natural disasters or long-lasting droughts occurred, the combination with the pandemic was devastating for the local economy, especially for smallholder farmers (SDG 1/8).⁴⁶

Conclusion: The COVID-19 pandemic taught several lessons to be taken forward for sustainable development, in the aftermath of a pandemic and in preparation for potential future ones. The One Health and One Welfare approach should be at the forefront of globally coordinated responses, highlighting the interconnectedness of animal, human and ecosystem health.⁴⁷

The following actions can build resilience:

- Strengthening funding and structures of disease surveillance;
- Developing contingency plans for livestock logistics;
- Reforming labour policies in industrial farming;
- Supporting smallholders and women;
- Reducing production drivers (such as land degradation and encroachment of wildlife habitats)
- Increasing investments in animal health and preparedness, prevention, and control, including:
 - vaccine development
 - surveillance of wildlife/livestock interaction
 - essential veterinary services etc..

⁴¹ United Nations (2020), *The Impact of COVID-19 on Food Security and Nutrition*. [Link](#).

⁴² Raihan, A. and Afroz Himu, H. (2023), *Global impact of COVID-19 on the sustainability of livestock production*. *Global Sustainability Research*. [Link](#).

⁴³ Meurens, F. et.al. (2021), *Risks of zoonotic disease emergence at the interface of wildlife and livestock systems*. *Animal*. [Link](#).

⁴⁴ Raihan, A. and Himu, H.A., (2023), *Global impact of COVID-19 on the sustainability of livestock production*. [Link](#).

⁴⁵ Copernicus (2020), *Emissions changes due to lockdown measures during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe*. [Link](#).

⁴⁶ Swain, B.B. et.al. (2020), *Impact of COVID-19 on livestock sector in India: An economic analysis*. *Journal of Entomology and Zoology Studies*. [Link](#).

⁴⁷ Pinto, J. (2021), *COVID-19: Lessons Learned from COVID-19 Pandemic through the lens of a One Health approach*. *Opinion Paper*. [Link](#).



SDG 4 QUALITY EDUCATION

Access to education is key to achieving the SDGs. For children in poorer families, being able to receive an education is closely tied to the well-being of working equines and livestock within their households.⁴⁸ Working equines provide essential support by generating income to cover school fees and serving as valuable physical assets by carrying water and assisting in soil tillage. By reducing the burden of daily labour, these animals enable children to attend school, particularly in rural and resource-poor communities.

However, when an equine is lost due to theft, injury, or death, the impact on the household can be immediate and severe. Children, especially girls, are often withdrawn from school to take on the labour previously provided by the animal.⁴⁹ This reinforces the strong link between education and gender equality. Today, 119.3 million girls remain out of formal education, with the highest disparities found in sub-Saharan Africa.⁵⁰ Expanding access to education is therefore a critical pathway to breaking the cycle of poverty and advancing gender equity.

Beyond equines, improved livestock production systems offer important opportunities to support education in livestock-dependent households. Through extension services, farmer training, and improved animal health and management practices, livestock productivity and income can be increased.⁵¹ These improvements reduce the reliance on child labour and enhance household resilience, making it more feasible for children to remain in school. Strengthening these systems is essential to achieving SDG 4.



SDG 5 GENDER EQUALITY

Although women make up the majority of small-scale farmers, they are significantly less likely than men to own agricultural land.⁵² According to a recent FAO SDG Progress Report, fewer than half of women worldwide have ownership or secure rights to agricultural lands.⁵³ These persistent gender disparities undermine women's status in their communities and weaken their personal resilience.⁵⁴

By 2050, extreme weather events could push up to 158 million more women and girls, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, into extreme poverty. Multiple studies have shown that small livestock production, such as pigs and chickens, provides resilient and low-risk livelihoods, especially in the face of climate change.⁵⁵ Small livestock require minimal capital investment and can help address household food security, while also generating a secure income for women.

Working equines, including donkeys and horses, further support women by reducing the physical burden of household and agricultural tasks such as collecting water, transporting goods, and ploughing land. This not only improves women's quality of life but also enhances their social and economic empowerment.

To advance SDG 5, targeted interventions such as providing access to small livestock, veterinary care, training in animal husbandry, and improved technologies can help women achieve economic independence.⁵⁶ Policy changes that increase women's access to land, productive assets, markets and credit are also essential to promote gender equality in the livestock sector and support the welfare of working animals.⁵⁷

⁴⁸ FAO (2018), *World Livestock: Transforming the livestock sector through the Sustainable Development Goals*. [Link](#).

⁴⁹ The Donkey Sanctuary (2025), *Donkeys in global trade. Stolen donkeys, stolen futures: The impact of ejiao on Africa's women and children*. [Link](#).

⁵⁰ UN-Women and DESA (2024), *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2024*. [Link](#).

⁵¹ FAO (2016), *Farmer field school guidance document – Planning for quality programmes*. [Link](#).

⁵² UN-Women and DESA (2024), *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2024*. [Link](#).

⁵³ FAO (2025), *Tracking progress on food and agriculture-related SDG indicators 2025*. [Link](#).

⁵⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵⁵ IIRR and CEDAC (2020), *Small livestock: climate-smart, environmentally sound, economically empowering, gender fair and transformative agricultural enterprises in Cambodia. A brief for decision makers*. [Link](#).

⁵⁶ Gning, S. B., Dione, M., Sene, M. T. D., Sow, A., & Fall, A. (2024), *Gender considerations in innovation platforms in the livestock sector in Mali*. Innovation and Development. [Link](#).

⁵⁷ Quisumbing, A. R., Meinzen-Dick, R. S., & Smith, L. C. (2004), *Increasing the effective participation of women in food and nutrition security in Africa*. [Link](#).



SDG 6 & 14

CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION & LIFE BELOW WATER

To advance on SDG 6, both improving water efficiency and waste management, and equal access to water are key for agriculture to operate with greater efficiency. Globally, 43% of countries have achieved an increase in water use efficiency and addressed water scarcity, and most of this progress was documented in Oceania, North America and Europe, and overall in the agriculture sector.⁵⁸ Where water is not easily accessible, working animals often facilitate carrying water to supply households, businesses and agriculture.⁵⁹ Livestock production accounts for approximately 30% of the water used in the agricultural sector, with beef being the most water-intensive sector.⁶⁰ As pointed out in the previous report, the predominance of grain-based feed in industrial livestock farming reinforces water usage.⁶¹ An overuse of groundwater contributes to water stress and scarcity. In 2022, for at least one quarter

of the year, 40% of the EU's territory experienced water scarcity conditions.

Pollution of water occurs through nutrient leaks or active chemical substances from concentrated livestock waste sources. Aquaculture is another contributor to water pollution, for instance, when a high amount of chemicals and medications is used. These are a threat to public health (waterborne zoonoses) and environmental health. Rivers and the ocean suffer, and the resulting eutrophication can harm water ecosystems through oxygen depletion and algal blooms.⁶² Oceans support millions of people, the majority of these being small-scale fisheries that deliver animal protein to their communities. The sustainability of fishery resources was at 65.4% in 2021, with a declining trend. Political advancement for SDG 14 took place recently. The Nice Ocean Action Plan 2025 is a framework with a political declaration and commitments to SDG 14, such as a EUR 8.7 billion investment commitment to tackle ocean conservation and new Marine Protected Areas. At the World Trade Organisation level, the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies entered into force in September 2025, including rules on prohibiting illegal and unregulated fishing and overfishing.

⁵⁸ FAO (2025), *Tracking progress on food and agriculture-related SDG indicators 2025*. [Link](#).

⁵⁹ ICWE (2028), *Achieving Agenda 2020: How the welfare of working animals delivers for development*. [Link](#).

⁶⁰ FAO (2018), *World Livestock: Transforming the livestock sector through the Sustainable Development Goals*. [Link](#).

⁶¹ Mekonnen, M. and Hoekstra, A. (2012), *A global assessment of the water footprint of farm animal products*. Ecosystems. [Link](#).

⁶² Eurostat (2025), *Sustainable development in the European Union. Overview of progress towards the SDGs in an EU context*. [Link](#).

Disaster Risk

The UN's SDG Indicators report highlights that 2024 was the first year in which global temperatures exceeded 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.⁶³ Increasingly frequent and severe weather events are affecting food production, livestock productivity, and overall food security⁶⁴ (SDG 1, 2, 3, 13). Within this context, animals play an important role in supporting community resilience. For example, during the 2019 drought in Umerkot, Pakistan, families relied on donkeys to fetch and transport drinking water.

Working equines contribute to disaster resilience across all phases of crisis.⁶⁵ Before disasters, they help to transport water, food, and agricultural goods, and support land ploughing and soil conservation. During emergency response, they facilitate the movement of cattle and people, support evacuation and rescue efforts, and enable continued access to local markets. After disasters, they assist in crop rehabilitation, debris clearance, and the transport of reconstruction materials, helping restore livelihoods and economic activity.

Animals are therefore integral to economic recovery and resilience following natural disasters. In low-income communities, the loss of livestock and working animals due to lack of feed, water, or veterinary care can increase vulnerability and deepen poverty (SDG 1, 2, 3). The 'One Health' framework highlights the interdependence between human, animal, and environmental health. Without adequate care for animals, families may lose access to income, transportation, and local markets, further compromising their recovery.

On 26 November 2024, the United Nations adopted a resolution acknowledging the vital role of working animals in disaster risk reduction.⁶⁶ The resolution encourages member states to include livestock and working animals in disaster preparedness and resilience planning.



For example, following the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, mules were used to transport food, water, and medical supplies to remote communities inaccessible by vehicles.⁶⁷ In 2019, after severe flooding in West India, emergency responses included the provision of assistance to hundreds of donkeys stranded and at risk from rising waters. In drought-affected regions of southern Zimbabwe, community partnerships have supported the installation of boreholes, improving water access for both people and working animals. During the 2005 earthquakes in Pakistan, donkey trains were employed to deliver relief supplies to isolated mountain communities when access roads were destroyed. These examples illustrate how integrating animal welfare considerations into disaster management can strengthen community resilience and contribute to achieving the SDGs.

⁶³ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2025), *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025*. [Link](#).

⁶⁴ Rojas-Downing, M. M., Nejadhashemi, A. P., Harrigan, T., & Woznicki, S. A. (2017), *Climate change and livestock: Impacts, adaptation, and mitigation*. *Climate risk management*, 16, 145-163. [Link](#).

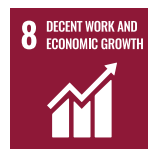
⁶⁵ Brooke (2025), *Working equids and their welfare status in disaster risk management: Invaluable support to resilience and recovery in Nicaragua*. [Link](#).

⁶⁶ UN Resolution (2024). [Link](#).

⁶⁷ The Donkey Sanctuary (n.d.), *Donkeys in Disaster Zones*. [Link](#). Both the Donkey Sanctuary and Brooks provided input on their projects related to natural disasters and disaster risk reduction in interviews with the authors.



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SDG 8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

The livestock sector employs a multitude of people. An industrialised system, however, requires fewer workers through automation and often exhibits issues with working conditions. As detailed in the first report, workers receive low wages and their health and safety are impacted by working conditions in factories or slaughterhouses, as well as exposure to diseases (SDG 3). While no corresponding statistic on fatal accidents from work in the livestock sector was available, the ILO estimates that around 210,000 agricultural workers die every year due to work-related accidents, injuries that happen most often through machinery and handling animals, particularly cattle.⁶⁸ Accidents can surge through risk factors, such as exposure to extreme weather conditions – a risk that will increase through climate change. Most accidents are registered among vulnerable groups, including in subsistence farming and among seasonal and migrant workers. These workers may also face instability in legal status and access to public services. A recent international example is the targeting of migrant workers in deportation raids in the United States.⁶⁹

Smallholders make up most of the global agricultural systems, and their development is crucial to income growth, poverty reduction and more. Livestock programmes in low-productive agricultural systems can diversify income and increase streams.⁷⁰ In some regions, a healthy working equid can increase a farm's additional income.⁷¹ Focusing on the improved welfare of these animals supports productivity and local economies.

⁶⁸ International Labour Organization (2015), *Agriculture: a hazardous work*. [Link](#); SafeHabitus (2024), *Farm safety in the EU*. [Link](#).

⁶⁹ Pillai, A., et. al. (2025), *Potential Implications of Immigration Restrictions on the U.S. Agricultural Workforce*. [Link](#).

⁷⁰ Abraham, M. and Pingali, P. (2020), *Transforming Smallholder Agriculture to Achieve the SDGs. The Role of Smallholder Farms in Food and Nutrition Security*. [Link](#).

⁷¹ ICWE (2018), *Achieving Agenda 2020: How the welfare of working animals delivers for development*. [Link](#).



SDG 13 TAKE URGENT ACTION TO COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE

According to a 2022 FAO report, crop and livestock activities account for 48% of the 16.2 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions produced by global agrifood systems.⁷² Within the EU, when emissions for production, transport, and animal feed are considered, the livestock sector contributes between 81–86% of the total agricultural GHG emissions.⁷³ These emissions are also highly concentrated among major producers. A 2022 study by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy and the Changing Markets Foundation found that emissions from the five largest meat corporations and the top ten dairy corporations together account for over 80% of the EU’s methane footprint.⁷⁴

Globally, livestock production is a key driver of land-use change. Particularly in South America and Africa, where land-use change contributes to 31% and 43% respectively, of the total agrifood system emissions.⁷⁵ This pressure is closely linked to deforestation, as forests are cleared for

pasture or to grow feed crops such as soy and maize. In Brazil, the world’s second-largest beef producer and leading beef exporter, livestock production is responsible for 75% of the 80 million hectares of forest lost.⁷⁶

Beyond the direct climate impacts of intensive livestock production, wild animals are increasingly affected by climate change. More frequent and severe fires and floods are destroying habitats and food sources. For example, bushfires in Australia as of March 2020 were estimated to have killed more than one billion animals.⁷⁷

To achieve SDG 13 and to meet the climate targets outlined in the Paris Agreement, emissions from the livestock industry should be lowered. While the EU Climate Law aims to cut overall emissions by at least 55% by 2030, progress remains uncertain due to the absence of clear, harmonised policies and insufficient support for transitioning the agricultural sector. A transition towards extensive and pasture-based livestock systems, as well as dietary shifts, can deliver co-benefits for both climate mitigation and animal welfare.⁷⁸

⁷² FAO (2024), *Greenhouse gas emissions from agrifood systems – Global, regional and country trends, 2000–2022*. [Link](#).

⁷³ European Commission: Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, Peyraud, J.-L. and MacLeod, M. (2020), *Future of EU livestock – How to contribute to a sustainable agricultural sector?* [Link](#).

⁷⁴ Changing Markets Foundation and Institute for Agricultural and Trade Policy (2023), *Emissions Impossible: How emissions from big meat and dairy are heating up the planet – Methane Edition*. [Link](#).

⁷⁵ FAO (2024), *Greenhouse gas emissions from agrifood systems – Global, regional and country trends, 2000–2022*. [Link](#).

⁷⁶ Donoso, V. G., Hirye, M. C. M., Gerwenat, C., & Reicher, C. (2024), *Amazon Deforestation and Global Meat Consumption Trends: An Assessment of Land Use Change and Market Data from Rondônia That Shows Why We Should Consider Changing Our Diets*. Sustainability. [Link](#).

⁷⁷ Filkov, A. I., Ngo, T., Matthews, S., Telfer, S., & Penman, T. D. (2020), *Impact of Australia’s catastrophic 2019/20 bushfire season on communities and environment. Retrospective analysis and current trends*. Journal of safety science and resilience. [Link](#).

⁷⁸ European Commission: Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, Peyraud, J.-L. and MacLeod, M. (2020), *Future of EU livestock – How to contribute to a sustainable agricultural sector?* [Link](#).



SDG 15 LIFE ON LAND

Industrial animal agriculture is one of the most significant drivers of habitat destruction and biodiversity loss. To meet the increasing global demand for meat and dairy, vast areas of land are cleared for grazing and for the cultivation of feed crops such as soy and cereals. This land conversion has reduced the natural ranges of mammals, birds, and amphibians by 18%, a figure expected to rise to 23% if current practices continue.⁷⁹

Beyond land use, industrial livestock farming exerts enormous pressure on freshwater resources and ecosystems.⁸⁰ Agriculture accounts for 70% of global freshwater withdrawals, with unsustainable usage depleting groundwater and reducing river flows and lake levels.⁸¹ Such degradation not only harms wildlife but also undermines ecosystem services that are essential for agriculture and food security. According to the Living Planet Index, monitored wildlife populations declined by 73% between 1970 and 2020, with Latin America and the Caribbean experiencing the steepest regional losses at 95%.⁸² Agriculture-related habitat loss affects over 80% of threatened terrestrial bird and mammal species.⁸³ Declines in key species like pollinators also pose a direct threat to food production, endangering crops worth an estimated US \$235-577 billion annually, and leaving food systems less resilient to pests, diseases, and climate shocks.⁸⁴

Achieving SDG 15 and improving animal welfare requires a fundamental shift in food production. Nature-based solutions such as regenerative agriculture and agroforestry not only restore ecosystems but also support carbon sequestration, water regulation, soil health, and food security.⁸⁵ By reducing reliance on intensive livestock farming and shifting diets, pressure on land and water resources can decrease while enhancing biodiversity. Recognising the interconnection between animal welfare, ecosystem health, and food security is key. Both the IPCC⁸⁶ and IPBES⁸⁷ have stressed that transforming food systems is essential to meeting climate and biodiversity targets by 2030.

This section outlined the connections between animal welfare and SDGs. The following sections will explore how trade policies impact animal welfare and how these effects can be leveraged to support progress towards achieving the SDGs.

⁷⁹ Beyer, R. M., & Manica, A. (2020), *Historical and projected future range sizes of the world's mammals, birds, and amphibians*. Nature communications. [Link](#).

⁸⁰ Thornton, P. K., & Herrero, M. (2010), *The inter-linkages between rapid growth in livestock production, climate change, and the impacts on water resources, land use, and deforestation*. [Link](#).

⁸¹ Fujs T and Kashiwase H. (2023), *Strains on freshwater resources: The impact of food production on water consumption*. World Bank Data Blog 2023. [Link](#).

⁸² WWF (2024), *Living Planet Report 2024 – A System in Peril*. [Link](#).

⁸³ Benton, T. G., Bieg, C., Harwatt, H., Pudasaini, R., & Wellesley, L. (2021), *Food system impacts on biodiversity loss. Three levers for food system transformation in support of nature*. [Link](#).

⁸⁴ IPBES (2016), *Summary for policymakers of the assessment report on pollinators, pollination and food production*. [Link](#).

⁸⁵ European Environment Agency (2024), *Solutions for restoring Europe's agricultural ecosystems*. [Link](#).

⁸⁶ IPCC (2023), *Summary for Policymakers. In: Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. [Link](#).

⁸⁷ IPBES (2019), *Summary for policymakers of the global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*. [Link](#).

3.

ANIMAL WELFARE AND TRADE

The previous section established existing interlinkages between levels of animal welfare and their individual contribution to several SDGs. Though in an interconnected world, where countries have scaled up the industrialised production of animal products to meet the consumer preferences of ever-growing populations, international trade plays a key role in meeting these demands. Yet, international trade can also contribute to hindering the achievement of countries' SDGs. High-income countries with high standards of living outsource negative environmental and socioeconomic impacts abroad, for example, by consuming products that are cheaper but have been produced in environmentally unfriendly manners and under less stringent environmental laws and regulations than in their home countries.⁸⁸ This trend can also apply to the outsourcing of animal suffering, as EU citizens consume agri-food products exported from countries with less stringent or even non-existent animal welfare legislation.

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) is the global body that sets and enforces rules for international trade. Under its framework, members cannot discriminate between trading partners and therefore apply the 'most-favoured nation' (MFN) principle, meaning a country must grant its most preferential tariff rate to all WTO members.⁸⁹ However, WTO rules allow an important exception: members may negotiate bilateral or regional free trade agreements (FTAs) that grant lower or zero tariffs to participating partners. These agreements create preferential access beyond the MFN rate while remaining subject to WTO disciplines designed to prevent unfair discrimination.

The negotiation of bilateral FTAs offers trade partners the opportunity to not only set lower tariffs for specific goods but also determine the extent they would like to liberalise specific sectors. This is especially relevant for agriculture, which has traditionally been one of the most protected sectors in international trade negotiations due to concerns over food security, rural livelihoods and the political sensitivity of farmer incomes. This could involve non-zero tariffs for agri-food products, geographical indicators, and import quotas. Import quotas are most commonly applied in the agri-food sector, covering products such as beef, sugar, and dairy, where they serve to shield farmers from sudden surges in cheaper imports while balancing consumer access to foreign products. Today, these restrictions are usually managed through tariff-rate quotas (TRQs), which allow limited volumes of certain goods to enter at a lower tariff, with higher tariffs applying once the quota is filled.

Two Sides of Liberalising Trade in Animal Products

In international trade, tools exist for addressing imports of low-welfare goods. Governments can shape how trade affects animal welfare by either limiting low-welfare imports through tariffs, quotas or bans, or by boosting high-welfare products via labelling schemes and subsidies.

Lower tariffs and fewer trade barriers can increase imports of cheaper animal products from countries with weaker welfare standards. This undercuts domestic producers who face higher costs to comply with stronger rules and may create pressure to lower national standards. Expanded trade volumes also risk increasing total animal suffering. Weak or absent welfare-related labelling leaves consumers unaware of production conditions, sustaining demand for low-welfare goods.

At the same time, trade agreements can be powerful levers to raise welfare standards abroad. Provisions on cooperation, technical assistance and conditional tariff preferences can encourage trading partners to improve their practices. Liberalisation can also widen the market for higher-welfare products, lower their costs through scale, and make multinational supply chains more responsive to consumers demanding higher standards.

⁸⁸ Sachs, J.D., et.al. (2025), *Sustainable Development Report 2025*. [Link](#).

⁸⁹ World Trade Organisation (n.d.), *Principles of the trading system*. [Link](#).



The following two subsections discuss the evolution of and updates to animal protection in the EU's trade policy and at the WTO level.

3.1 EU TRADE POLICY

3.1.1 Where did we start?

Animal protection provisions in EU trade agreements initially emerged in two strands: animal welfare, typically placed in the Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) or regulatory cooperation chapters, and conservation, included in the Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD) chapter. Early references were largely aspirational, focusing on cooperation rather than enforceable commitments, and conservation provisions dealt mainly with wildlife trafficking rather than welfare.

The first explicit reference to animal welfare appeared in the 2002 EU-Chile Association Agreement, which acknowledged animal welfare as an SPS objective. Subsequent FTAs with partners such as South Korea, Canada, Japan, Vietnam, Mexico and Mercosur continued this practice, though provisions remained narrow in scope and limited in impact.⁹⁰

3.1.2 Where have we come?

The EU's latest trade strategy "An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy",⁹¹ published in 2021, built on its former "Trade for All",⁹² further embedding its sustainability agenda into EU trade policy, while acknowledging the need to remain an open trading partner in the face of growing global uncertainty, and assertive in the EU's "ability to make its own choices and shape the world around it through leadership and engagement, reflecting its strategic interests and values."

The ambition to pursue sustainable trade agreements was confirmed again in the EU's early TSD review, "The power of trade partnerships: together for green and just economic growth",⁹³ published in June 2022. The revised approach to TSD chapters marked a clear advancement compared to the 2018 TSD Action Plan and is widely seen as a positive step towards strengthening sustainability within EU FTAs. Stakeholders generally welcomed the Commission's efforts to strengthen sustainability provisions in its FTAs, particularly the stronger emphasis on monitoring and enforcement. In this context, the enhanced role of Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs) and the improved enforcement tools, most notably the Single Entry Point, are highlighted as significant progress.⁹⁴

Sustainable Food Systems and Animal Welfare

Both the 2021 trade policy strategy and the 2022 reviewed TSD referenced, for the first time, the need to transition to sustainable food systems (SFS), and thus propose a dedicated chapter on SFS to be included in future FTAs. Yet, provisions relevant to animal welfare and AMR have been included in EU FTAs that have been under negotiation prior to the adoption of these trade strategy communications.

For example, the Modernisation of the Trade part of the EU-Mexico Global Agreement, which reached a political agreement in April 2018 but only finalised negotiations in January 2025, includes a Chapter on Cooperation in Animal Welfare and AMR. This Chapter provides a framework for dialogue and cooperation on these issues and establishes a joint working group on animal welfare and combating AMR. Yet, the Chapter also features an article outlining the content of this cooperation Chapter is not subject to dispute settlement. The EU-Mexico Global Modernisation Agreement is not yet currently in force.

⁹⁰ Eurogroup for Animals (2019), *Animal Welfare, Trade and Sustainable Development Goals*. [Link](#).

⁹¹ European Commission (2021), *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Trade Policy Review – An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy*. [Link](#).

⁹² European Commission (2014), *Trade for all*. [Link](#).

⁹³ European Commission (2021), *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. The power of trade partnerships: together for green and just economic growth*. [Link](#).

⁹⁴ Blot, E. (2023), *Reflections on the new approach to the TSD Chapters for greener trade*. [Link](#).

Another example is the EU–Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), which entered into force in February 2019, where an article on animal welfare is tucked into the Chapter on Good Regulatory Practices and Regulatory Cooperation. This article allows the Parties to adopt a working plan with animal welfare priorities and to establish an Animal Welfare Technical Working Group to exchange information, expertise and experiences in the field of animal welfare and to explore the possibility of promoting further cooperation. However, this working group has yet to be set up under the EPA.

After more than two decades of negotiations, the conclusion of the long-contested EU–Mercosur Association Agreement is within reach. Although the negotiations formally concluded in June 2019, the agreement faced strong opposition from several EU Member States and civil society organisations, primarily over environmental and agri-food concerns. In response, between 2023 and 2024 the EU and Mercosur partners worked to refine the deal by negotiating over twenty additional Annex documents to supplement and strengthen the original 2019 text. On 3 September 2025, the European Commission presented the finalised version of the agreement to the Council and the European Parliament.⁹⁵

With regard to animal welfare, the EU–Mercosur Agreement includes a dedicated Chapter on Dialogues covering issues along the agri-food chain. This framework provides for exchanges on animal welfare, agricultural biotechnology, antimicrobial resistance, and scientific aspects of food safety, animal health, and plant health. The agreement also introduces an animal welfare conditionality for shelled eggs, although current EU imports of these products remain negligible compared to meat imports.⁹⁶ Civil society groups have raised further concerns about the inclusion of a ‘rebalancing mechanism’ in the dispute settlement chapter, which would allow parties to respond to regulatory changes by others that generate “trade effects” and distort the functioning of the FTA. This mechanism could pose a risk of regulatory chill, as the EU seeks to avoid challenges to its domestic sustainability policies with trade implications. In particular, measures such as the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) and the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) are expected to be most susceptible to such challenges.⁹⁷

Since the publication of the 2021 trade policy strategy and the 2022 reviewed TSD approach, the EU–New Zealand FTA, concluded in June 2022, was the first agreement to include these standalone chapters on SFS and animal welfare, in addition to an animal welfare conditionality ensuring the beef quota granted by the FTA is reserved for grass-fed animals.⁹⁸ Then, in December 2022, the EU–Chile interim FTA became the second trade agreement to feature the new TSD approach, including a dedicated chapter on SFS. This Chapter aims to promote bilateral cooperation between trade partners to improve the sustainability and resilience of their respective food systems. Both agreements establish (sub-)Committees on SFS and can establish dedicated Working Groups on Animal Welfare and AMR. Yet, due to the cooperative language used in these Chapters, these provisions remain non-binding and thus difficult to enforce.⁹⁹

On 23 September 2025, the EU and Indonesia concluded the Indonesia–EU Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IEU–CEPA), which also includes a dedicated Chapter on Sustainable Food Systems (SFS). Under this chapter, the Parties commit to cooperate on key areas such as food safety, combating agri-food fraud, addressing AMR, and promoting animal welfare. A novelty in this agreement is the introduction of an annual action plan for SFS-related areas, setting out specific objectives and milestones to facilitate monitoring and implementation. Finally, the Agreement’s Committee on Sustainable Growth, meeting in its SFS configuration, is responsible for defining cooperation priorities, developing corresponding work plans, and advancing joint efforts in relevant multilateral fora.

For trade negotiations launched after the reviewed TSD approach in 2022, the European Commission includes textual proposals for an SFS Chapter with the integrated articles on cooperation on animal welfare and AMR, as is the case for the negotiations with Thailand, India, the Philippines, and Malaysia.

⁹⁵ European Commission (2025), *EU–Mercosur: Text of the agreement*. [Link](#).

⁹⁶ Eurogroup for Animals (2025), *EU–Mercosur deal undermines EU progress on animals*. [Link](#).

⁹⁷ CAN Europe (2025), *European Commission sidelines Member States by splitting controversial EU–Mercosur deal*. [Link](#).

⁹⁸ Eurogroup for Animals (2023), *The EU–New Zealand trade deal includes animal welfare conditionality*. [Link](#).

⁹⁹ Blot, E., Sgarbi, F. and Oger, A. (2023), *Reconciling agricultural and sustainability objectives in the EU–New Zealand FTA*. Institute for European Environmental Policy. [Link](#).

Trade and Sustainable Development

The 2022 revision of the TSD approach set out a 20-point plan to enhance the sustainability dimension of EU FTAs. Key elements include tailoring TSD provisions to country-specific environmental and social priorities, identified through more comprehensive Sustainability Impact Assessments and civil society input; reinforcing the role of Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs) in monitoring and flagging implementation issues; and strengthening enforcement, both by clarifying how the Single Entry Point can be used for TSD complaints and by introducing, as a last resort, trade sanctions for breaches of core ILO principles or the Paris Agreement.¹⁰⁰

The adoption of the revised TSD approach in the EU's newest FTAs has seen varied degrees of implementation. The EU-New Zealand FTA incorporates the effective implementation of the Paris Agreement as an essential element of the agreement (i.e., non-compliance¹⁰¹ can lead to a suspension of trade concessions) and the inclusion of new TSD Articles on Fossil Fuel Subsidy Reform and Māori trade and economic cooperation. Moreover, the EU-New Zealand FTA is the first to incorporate TSD provisions under the agreement's general dispute settlement framework. While market access disputes can lead to sanctions or compensation, breaches of TSD commitments have so far never triggered such measures.¹⁰²

In comparison, the EU-Chile trade agreement takes a step forward but lags behind the EU-New Zealand FTA in several aspects. The agreement does not include the effective implementation of the Paris Agreement as an essential element of the deal.¹⁰³ However, in their Joint Statement on TSD, the EU and Chile commit to formally launch a review process upon entry into force of the agreement to consider the incorporation of additional provisions, including making the Paris Agreement an essential element. Moreover, disputes concerning TSD provisions remain to be resolved by the TSD Chapter's dispute settlement mechanism with no recourse for sanctions. Yet, the TSD's dispute settlement provisions have been amended in the EU-Chile agreement to reflect a shift towards a more outcome-oriented approach. Once a panel of experts issues its findings, the Parties must discuss follow-up measures and implement them within three months of publication. This wording is designed to

ensure that dispute resolution leads to concrete action, rather than depending solely on the Parties' willingness to comply.¹⁰⁴

Concerning improved content and language of TSD provisions relevant to animal protection, both the EU-New Zealand and EU-Chile FTAs mark a strengthening of biodiversity provisions compared to earlier agreements. In both cases, the TSD articles commit the Parties to undertake actions to combat illegal wildlife trade, ensure the conservation and sustainable use of CITES-listed species, address invasive alien species, and encourage trade in products derived from sustainably managed biological resources. A notable innovation is the explicit recognition of indigenous and local knowledge in biodiversity conservation, thus contributing to SDG 14 and 15, alongside binding language to require effective measures against illegal wildlife trade, cooperation on access to genetic resources and benefit-sharing in line with the Convention on Biological Diversity.

3.1.3 Where does that leave us?

The improvements to both the TSD provisions and enforcement, and the inclusion of dedicated Chapters on SFS and Articles on Animal Welfare and AMR are a welcome step in the right direction to better embed sustainability and animal protections in FTAs. These Chapters and their provisions remain largely cooperation-focused to achieve common understandings of the issues at hand, and cooperate in (sub-)committees and at multilateral fora. While concrete efforts and dedicated, well-functioning and funded committees can yield positive policy outcomes and should not be overlooked, the SFS and TSD Chapters are likely to still fall short in delivering conclusive outcomes for animal protection globally.

¹⁰⁰ Blot, E. (2023), *Reflections on the new approach to the TSD Chapters for greener trade*. [Link](#).

¹⁰¹ Non-compliance with the Paris Agreement in this context refers to actions or omissions that would materially undermine the object and purpose of the Paris Agreement. While the text does not specify which actions would constitute such a breach, this provision, defined as an "essential element" of the FTA, serves as a safeguard to ensure continued commitment to the Paris Agreement. Either Party's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement could therefore trigger the partial or full suspension of trade concessions under the agreement. See Blot, E., & Li, S. (2023). *Post-FTA briefing: EU-New Zealand*. [Link](#).

¹⁰² Blot, E. and Li, S. (2023), *Post-FTA briefing: EU-New Zealand*. [Link](#).

¹⁰³ Blot, E. and Li, S. (2023), *Post-FTA briefing: EU-Chile*. [Link](#).

¹⁰⁴ Joint Statement on Trade and Sustainable Development by the European Union and Chile (2022). [Link](#).

Animal Welfare in EU FTAs

In their 2018 policy brief on Animal Welfare, Trade and Sustainable Development Goals, Eurogroup for Animals put forward recommendations to improve and embed animal protections in the existing framework for EU FTAs:

Future Animal Welfare Chapters or integrated into SPS or Regulatory Cooperation:

- **Conditional liberalisation:** Allow imports only if products meet EU-equivalent animal welfare standards.
- **Right to regulate:** Safeguard the EU's autonomy to set animal welfare standards and prevent trade agreements from discouraging higher welfare regulation ("chilling effect"). Consider the inclusion of provisions to prevent WTO challenges to EU animal-welfare-based trade restrictions.
- **Cooperation and technical assistance:** Use FTAs to support third countries in raising their animal welfare standards.

For strengthened TSD chapters:

- **Integrate animal welfare in TSD provisions:**
 - Explicitly recognise animal welfare as integral to sustainable agriculture and development and to multiple SDGs (e.g. Life on Land, climate action, health). Highlight the negative impacts of intensive farming on animal welfare, biodiversity, climate change, antimicrobial resistance, and environmental quality.
 - Emphasise links between animal welfare and sustainable agriculture, aquaculture, and biodiversity conservation.
 - Strengthen the enforcement of TSD provisions through more obligatory language.
- **Wildlife conservation and trade:**
 - Include detailed commitments on combating illegal wildlife trafficking.
 - Promote adding new species to CITES and address invasive alien species.
 - Consider species-specific provisions, deforestation measures, and a "positive list" approach for the exotic pets trade.
 - Tackle shortcomings in CITES (e.g. misuse of export quotas).



Overall, while the European Commission has made clear progress by strengthening its approach to TSD chapters and introducing dedicated provisions on animal welfare, the gap between ambition and practice remains significant. Many of the priorities identified by Eurogroup for Animals, such as conditional liberalisation, enforceable commitments, and a stronger recognition of the link between animal welfare and sustainable development, are still not fully reflected in the EU's trade agreements. Since these recommendations were first set out in 2018, progress has not been substantial enough, leaving even less time to align EU trade policy with the achievement of the SDGs by 2030. Bridging this divide will be essential if the EU is to translate its stated commitment to high animal welfare standards into meaningful outcomes through trade policy.



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3.2 GLOBAL TRADE POLICY

3.2.1 Evolution of animal protection at the WTO

As the global trade body, the WTO sets and enforces rules for international trade and provides a forum for its members to negotiate multilateral agreements, discuss issues related to global trade and resolve trade disputes. Under its framework, members cannot discriminate between trading partners and must apply the MFN principle.¹⁰⁵

Thirty years ago, the WTO founded the Committee on Trade and Environment (CTE), dedicated to providing a forum to discuss the impact of trade policies on the environment and of environmental policies on trade amongst WTO members.¹⁰⁶ Increasingly, the interlinkages between trade, global sustainability, and the SDGs have come more into focus at the WTO, which led to the establishment of the Trade and Environmental Sustainability Structured

Discussions (TESSD) in 2020 to complement the workings of the CTE. The TESSD has dedicated working groups on trade-related issues such as climate measures, environmental goods and services, circular economy and subsidies.¹⁰⁷

Yet, animal issues fall outside the scope of these environmental dialogues, and there are no other dedicated committees to discuss animal protection despite the link between animal welfare and its contribution to the SDGs. Instead, animal-related matters are mainly handled under the SPS Agreement, which governs how countries may regulate to safeguard human, animal, and plant health while avoiding disguised trade restrictions. The Agreement promotes cooperation with the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) in developing international standards and permits health and safety measures that are evidence-based and applied without discrimination.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, the WTO's Committee on Agriculture (CoA) is responsible for monitoring how the Agreement on Agriculture is applied and serves as a platform for members to discuss and resolve related issues.¹⁰⁹

The development of animal protection within the WTO has largely taken shape through dispute settlement cases rather than formal agreements. Since the early 1990s, animal-related and environmental trade disputes, such as US-Tuna Dolphin, US-Shrimp Turtles, and EC-Asbestos, have progressively defined the relationship between trade rules and non-trade concerns.

The first US-Tuna Dolphin dispute (1991) initially rejected the notion of product differentiation based on non-product-related production methods (such as fishing techniques).¹¹⁰ Yet, over time, WTO jurisprudence has evolved. In EC-Asbestos, the Appellate Body accepted that health risks and consumer perceptions could determine whether products were “like,”¹¹¹ and later US-Tuna rulings (2017, 2019) confirmed that labelling schemes, such as the “Dolphin Safe” label, can legitimately differentiate between production methods to protect animal welfare.¹¹²

A major milestone came with the 2014 EC-Seal Products ruling, where the WTO's Dispute Settlement Body recognised for the first time that animal welfare concerns fall under the “public morals” exception in GATT Article

¹⁰⁵ World Trade Organisation (n.d.), *Principles of the trading system*. [Link](#).

¹⁰⁶ World Trade Organisation (n.d.), *Committee on Trade and Environment*. [Link](#).

¹⁰⁷ World Trade Organisation (n.d.), *Trade and environmental sustainability*. [Link](#).

¹⁰⁸ World Trade Organisation (n.d.), *Sanitary and phytosanitary measures*. [Link](#).

¹⁰⁹ World Trade Organisation (n.d.), *Committee on Agriculture*. [Link](#).

¹¹⁰ World Trade Organisation (n.d.), *Mexico etc versus US: 'tuna-dolphin'*. [Link](#).

¹¹¹ World Trade Organisation (n.d.), *European Communities — Measures Affecting Asbestos and Products Containing Asbestos*. [Link](#).

¹¹² World Trade Organisation (n.d.), *United States — Measures Concerning the Importation, Marketing and Sale of Tuna and Tuna Products*. [Link](#).

XX(a).¹¹³ This decision established that trade restrictions could, in principle, be justified on moral grounds linked to animal welfare. The EC–Seals case remains a landmark as the first to uphold a trade restriction solely on animal welfare grounds. The EU successfully argued that seal hunting methods could not guarantee humane killing, and the Appellate Body accepted this as a legitimate expression of public moral concern.

Together, these cases suggest that WTO members may require imported goods to meet welfare standards equivalent to their own, provided such measures are grounded in public morals, applied without discrimination, and developed transparently in consultation with trading partners. As underscored in the US–Shrimp case, equivalence in outcomes, not identical methods, should guide such requirements.¹¹⁴ Greater awareness of these legal precedents could help countries confidently design animal welfare-based trade measures without fear of violating WTO rules.

3.2.2 Developments related to animal protection since then

The evolution of animal protection through WTO jurisprudence has gradually clarified how countries can design legislation that interacts with trade rules without breaching them. Key rulings, such as the EC–Seals case, have established that animal welfare can fall under legitimate exceptions like public morals, offering guidance on how to justify trade measures based on ethical or welfare concerns.

However, since the WTO Appellate Body ceased functioning in 2019 due to the United States blocking new appointments, this legal framework has become increasingly uncertain. Without a functioning appeals mechanism, disputes can no longer be definitively resolved, undermining the credibility and predictability of the WTO’s rules-based trading system. As a result, some members have grown hesitant to introduce new legislation, particularly measures that might be seen as discriminatory or trade-restrictive, out of concern that there is no reliable process to defend them if challenged. A clear case of this is the EC–Seals case, where, despite setting a groundbreaking precedent, the EU has refrained from adopting animal welfare legislation with a trade dimension since then.¹¹⁵

Geopolitical tensions, including the U.S.’s continued non-participation in restoring the Appellate Body and speculation about its future commitment to the WTO, further exacerbate this instability. These developments highlight the urgent need to restore confidence in the WTO’s dispute settlement system to ensure members can pursue legitimate public policy goals, including animal welfare, within a predictable and enforceable trade framework.

Despite the paralysis of its Appellate Body, the WTO has seen some meaningful progress on the sustainable development, environment and animal protection fronts through ministerial declarations, dialogues, and new agreements.

At the 12th Ministerial Conference (MC12) in 2022, ministers adopted the SPS Declaration: Responding to Modern SPS Challenges, instructing the SPS Committee to launch a work programme to strengthen how the SPS (Sanitary and Phytosanitary) Agreement is applied to food, animals, plants and related trade. The declaration explicitly links SPS implementation with global food security and more sustainable food systems.¹¹⁶ Also during MC12, WTO members adopted a Ministerial Statement on Plastic Pollution and Plastics Trade,¹¹⁷ which frames trade-related measures relevant to plastics (e.g. restricting harmful or unnecessary single-use plastics, promoting alternatives) in terms of environmental sustainability and SDG commitments.

At MC13 in 2024, the long-awaited Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies entered into force, marking a concrete step to restrict harmful subsidies that contribute to overfishing and to promote sustainable use of marine resources (see Box 3). Moreover, the Abu Dhabi Ministerial Declaration further underscored the WTO’s commitment to environment, sustainability, and responsible trade, reiterating links between trade and the SDGs.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ World Trade Organisation (n.d.), *European Communities — Measures Prohibiting the Importation and Marketing of Seal Products*, [Link](#).

¹¹⁴ See *Report of the Panel in United States-Import Prohibition of Certain Shrimp and Shrimp Products*, WT/DS 58/RW. 15 June 2001, paragraph 5.93; see also *Appellate Body Report in United States-Import Prohibition of Certain Shrimp and Shrimp Products*, WT/DS 58/AB/RW. 22 October 2001, paragraph 144.

¹¹⁵ Eurogroup for Animals (2017), *Chilling Effect of Trade on Animal Welfare*. [Link](#).

¹¹⁶ World Trade Organisation (n.d.), *SPS Declaration at MC12*. [Link](#).

¹¹⁷ World Trade Organisation (n.d.), *Plastics pollution and environmentally sustainable plastics trade*. [Link](#).

¹¹⁸ World Trade Organisation (2024), *MC13 outcomes*. [Link](#).



WTO's Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies

The push for global rules on fisheries subsidies began in 2001, when WTO members committed to clarifying and strengthening rules governing government support to fishing. Over the years, progress lagged: disagreements around the scope of prohibited subsidies, special treatment for developing countries, and how to address overcapacity kept negotiations alive but stalled.¹¹⁹ The adoption of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 (especially SDG 14.6, which calls for eliminating harmful fisheries subsidies) injected fresh momentum into the talks.¹²⁰

At the WTO's MC12 in June 2022, members agreed on the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies. In practice, the agreement bans certain subsidies in three categories:¹²¹

- 1 Subsidies that support illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing,
- 2 Subsidies to vessels fishing overfished stocks unless a sound rebuilding strategy is in place,
- 3 Subsidies for fishing on the high seas where no effective regional fisheries management applies.

¹¹⁹ TESS (2025), *Fisheries Subsidies and the WTO: How Far Have We Come?* [Link](#).

¹²⁰ World Trade Organisation (2022), *Introduction: Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies*. [Link](#).

¹²¹ IISD (2025), *WTO Fisheries Subsidies Agreement Enters into Force*. [Link](#).

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Mercatus Center (2023), *Beyond Adoption: Closing the Gaps in the WTO Fisheries Subsidies Agreement*, [Link](#).

¹²⁴ World Trade Organisation (2025), *WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies enters into force*. [Link](#).

The agreement also includes enhanced transparency obligations meaning members must report their subsidy programs, adhere to notification rules, and submit to oversight via a new Committee on Fisheries Subsidies. A "Fish Fund" mechanism was created to assist developing and least-developed countries in building capacity to comply.¹²² However, the agreement also leaves some gaps: subsidies that contribute to overcapacity but don't neatly fall into the prohibited categories were deferred to further negotiation.¹²³

To become binding, two-thirds of WTO members (111) needed to ratify the agreement. That threshold was met on 15 September 2025, and the agreement formally entered into force. On that date, a protocol amending the Marrakesh Agreement to insert the Fisheries Subsidies Agreement into the WTO's rulebook also took effect.¹²⁴

While this marks a landmark for environmental discipline in the WTO, the work continues. The agreement is time-limited, with the expectation that more ambitious rules will be negotiated within four years, or else the agreement may lapse unless members agree otherwise. Meanwhile, implementation challenges remain, especially for developing countries needing support to align their subsidy regimes.

These developments demonstrate that even without a functioning Appellate Body, WTO members continue to advance the multilateral trade agenda toward stronger environmental and animal welfare integration. However, the absence of a fully operational dispute settlement mechanism limits the enforceability of these commitments and heightens the need to restore a credible and predictable system for trade and sustainable development. At the same time, the slow pace of progress remains a pressing concern, illustrated by the more than two decades it took to conclude the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies. As global environmental degradation, unsustainable consumption patterns, and pressures on food systems intensify, time is of the essence. Without swifter and enforceable multilateral action, the gap between trade policy and global sustainability objectives risks widening further.

4.

CONCLUSIONS

Achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals requires an approach that recognises the interdependence of human, environmental and animal health. This report outlined the connections between sustainable development, global trade and animal welfare. It analysed how EU trade policies and engagement with the WTO can advance welfare standards in the EU and globally.

With the 2030 Agenda approaching its deadline, progress on most SDGs remains limited, stagnant or even regressive. Improving the health and well-being of livestock and working animals offers an opportunity to enhance progress on, among others, poverty reduction, food security and climate resilience. These synergies underline that addressing animal welfare is central to achieving the SDGs. Despite progress, industrial livestock farming continues to drive GHG emissions, biodiversity loss and soil degradation. Furthermore, while working animals are central to poverty reduction and food security, their contribution and health is often overlooked in national and international politics.

The EU has positioned animal welfare and sustainable development in the framework of One Health and One Welfare, reflected in initiatives such as the European Green Deal and the European Partnership on Animal Health and Welfare. EU citizens and policymakers are increasingly aware of the connection between their health and the animals' health, and the need for systemic change. In the effort to reach the SDGs and in designing a post-2030 global development framework, these lessons should be consolidated. Embedding measurable welfare indicators, strengthening interdisciplinary governance, and enhancing robust data collection are critical to monitoring progress and driving change.

Over the past two decades, the EU has progressively integrated sustainability and animal welfare into its trade policy framework. From early, largely aspirational references in SPS and TSD chapters, the approach has evolved through the 2021 Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy and the 2022 TSD review, culminating in the inclusion of dedicated chapters on Sustainable Food Systems (SFS) and Animal Welfare in recent FTAs. These developments mark meaningful progress in mainstreaming sustainability, supported by improved monitoring and enforcement tools such as Domestic Advisory Groups and the Single Entry Point.

At the multilateral level, animal protection within the WTO has advanced gradually, driven mainly by jurisprudence rather than policy. Dispute rulings such as US-Shrimp, EC-Asbestos, and EC-Seal Products have affirmed that animal welfare can fall under the "public morals" exception of GATT Article XX, providing legal space for welfare-based trade measures. However, the paralysis of the Appellate Body since 2019 has weakened predictability and enforcement, discouraging members from adopting new measures. Recent initiatives, such as the 2022 SPS Declaration, the Ministerial Statement on Plastic Pollution and Plastics Trade, and the 2025 Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, illustrate the WTO's incremental engagement with sustainability, though their limited scope underscores the need for deeper reform to advance the SDGs.

Within this global context, the EU stands out as a leading actor, yet the sustainability and animal welfare provisions in its FTAs remain largely cooperative and non-binding. While institutional mechanisms such as structured dialogues and technical working groups are positive steps, the absence of enforceable commitments or conditional liberalisation limits their impact. To bridge this gap between ambition and implementation, future EU trade agreements should move toward binding provisions that uphold the EU's right to regulate, ensure equivalence of imported products, and explicitly embed animal welfare within the broader sustainable development agenda. Strengthening both EU and multilateral frameworks will be essential for trade policy to contribute meaningfully to the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

