

Crises in Australia's Live Cattle exports to Indonesia: Where are the solutions?

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It was shocking to see the graphic images of mistreatment of Australian cattle exported to Indonesia screened on ABC's Four Corners program on 30 May 2011. The problem of cruelty to animals is not uncommon in many of the countries to which we export Australian livestock. Every few years these problems are brought to public attention by investigative programs often relying on evidence provided by animal welfare organisations such as Animal Australia which featured prominently in this program. One may question the motives of some of these groups- and say that their sole purpose is to stop livestock exports- but one can hardly argue with the veracity of the evidence they have presented in this case as in others. Before this incident there were reports of similar problems from the 90s onwards- in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, among others. What this tells us is that this is not an isolated problem but a persistent and complex one. What these countries have in common is that they are some of the major importers of Australian livestock; equally importantly they are mainly Muslim or Muslim majority countries.

The persistence of the problem is not due to government and industry inaction. Rather it is due to the failure of the actions taken and the strategies adopted to provide the appropriate and desired outcomes. It appears that the government & Industry relied purely on technical instruments- as they always have- to solve the problems associated with cruelty to animals. In the case of Indonesia, they have for example provided purpose-built boxes to restrain cattle to participating abattoirs through Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA) - a measure which is apparently deficient in design and implementation. They have also provided a stun and slaughter training program for slaughtermen in these abattoirs. Whatever their shortcomings, these are well-intentioned and important measures; they show the concern we have about the treatment of animals we export. Together these measures may provide some relief to and mitigate the suffering of animals. Under the appropriate conditions, they have the potential to improve the conditions under which the cattle are slaughtered, even though this has not been evident from the ABC program. The question is, are they sufficient in themselves to bring about the required solution? It is obvious that they have been unable to do so in isolation. If the recent ABC Four corners program is any guide then it is also clear that these instruments have failed dismally to bring about the mitigation of animal suffering.

Some may argue, and in fact have argued, that the problem is primarily one of implementation- and indeed in part it may well be. If that is the case then the question still remains why has implementation failed consistently over many years? I contend that the key to the solution lies elsewhere, even if implementation is only part of the problem. In order to find a more effective solution one needs to look outside the box of Australia's purely technical remedies. These remedies are basically instructional of dos and don'ts. They are not rooted in or validated by a belief system that sanctions their use and practice; one that justifies and endorses them as having intrinsic values. This is what Halal does for Muslims: it is a belief system as well as a world view that validates one's actions and behaviour. I have

long argued that Australia should utilise the concept and practice of Halal for purposes of trade and commerce, without success. We have heard few passing references to Halal in the ABC's Four Corners program. In these instances it was presented as if it was part of the problem not necessarily part of the solution. Certainly it was made clear that it could not offer any solution and therefore deserved no attention. A halal solution was nowhere to be seen in the program. Halal appeared to be anti-stun, anti-reform and at the very least resistant to the treatment of animals in a kind and civilized manner. But nothing could be further from the truth. If Australia wants to see a significant improvement in the treatment of animals in Muslim countries referred to above then it is the view of this writer that it can only achieve this by utilising the Halal approach. We can not continue to ignore the dominant culture of these countries and yet expect to achieve satisfactory results. We need to grasp the reality that we are operating in Halal markets and that the problems that arise may need to a greater or lesser extent a Halal approach in resolving them. This has not been the case in this instance or in any other. In fact the tendency has been in Australia to either ignore or minimise the value and efficacy of halal as a strategic tool. However, a solution or a process that is not sanctioned by halal norms particularly in relation to food runs the serious risk of failing to gain traction, widespread acceptance or validation. That is the reason why we should see Halal is the key to a permanent solution, not part of the problem as has been the case until now. Over the years government and industry have been tardy and merely reactive in response to concerns about animal welfare. No satisfactory solution has emerged for nearly twenty years. Community outrage, led and fanned by the media, is followed by immediate punitive action as in this case; but the problems do not go away. They crops up time and again in one Muslim country or another, with no long term solution in sight. Yet, if there is a will, there is good reason to believe that they can be solved- and more comprehensively than now or in the past.

The technical solutions which Australia has pursued to deal with the problem, sound as they may be in isolation, require Indonesian-Muslim norms and values to underpin them in order to gain traction and widespread acceptance. This is why we should embrace halal rules to create the sufficient conditions needed to entrench and normalize the technical solutions. Halal is the embodiment of Islamic culture and values. It enjoins Muslims to be kind to animals and to treat them well. Far from condoning mistreatment of animals, Halal rules require that slaughter must be conducted in a way that causes least distress, pain and suffering to the animal. The halal standard insists in particular on using a very sharp knife; so sharp in fact that killing ought to be performed in one swift, uninterrupted movement. It is almost apologetic in performing the act of slaughter, requiring the slaughterman to do so by invoking God's blessing and acknowledging that the animals' life is about to be taken solely for human sustenance. Even the tools for slaughter must not be exposed to the animal, in order not to cause distress, such that the knife being used for the kill must be hidden from its view. Many Muslim countries have also in recent times validated stunning before slaughter as an acceptable Islamic practice, mainly on the grounds that it does mitigate animal suffering- even though the question of whether stun or slaughter causes more or less suffering to the animal remains unresolved. These are humane values. Indonesia subscribes to them. It behoves Australia to utilise them to deal with the problems of mistreatment of animals in Muslim countries, as it is the most effective way to achieve the desired results. It is possible to develop and utilise our own Halal rules or develop a common framework with Indonesia to address issues of concern. This approach would require us to think outside the box; outside

that is the frame of reference to which we are accustomed. This is likely to unsettle those with a mindset that can not conceive of solutions outside the norm. To operationalize this approach needs working closely and cooperatively with Indonesians and/or with Australian Muslim leaders and experts. I am willing to discuss how this approach might be developed, structured and made to work.

The presumption underlying the ABC program is that Indonesians on the whole are horribly unkind to animals and unsympathetic to their welfare. It seemed to imply that the culture sanctions mistreatment or at least condones it. It did not explore ideas or alternatives on how to solve this issue and other broader related issues. Uncompromisingly strident in its criticism, it did not advance cooperation with the Indonesian government as an avenue worth pursuing. Instead it urged or seemed to favour punitive action. Unfortunately Australian reaction was swift and irreversible, with the Minister for Agriculture signing "a ban on 12 facilities in Indonesia which came into law at midnight... [Thursday 2 June 2011]". The media had called for bans and penalties if not for the termination of the cattle trade to Indonesia, to which Minister responded positively. The decision and the media campaign smack of both moral righteousness and hypocrisy at the same time. It was also an act of desperation to do something in order to silence criticism. Indonesia is not the only country to which Australia exports livestock where such practices can be found and the government knows it, and so do the media. If we carry this policy to its logical conclusion we might as well decide to have no livestock exports to our trading partners, including Indonesia. But we know that will not be done and perhaps can not be done without inflicting considerable economic and social costs on Australians. Australia needs to export livestock to Indonesia more than Indonesia needs to import them. This hardline approach is counterproductive. It is not about finding a solution at all but about abandoning the search for one. The trouble with this approach is that it does not look outside the box of purely technical solutions. It does not see Indonesia as having the capacity much less the desire to act- which is patently false. This is a dangerous view to take in trade and commerce and it may have broader implications for the relations between Australia and Indonesia if the arguments of the program and the conclusions drawn from it are accepted as sound policy prescriptions. Australians (and no less the Indonesians) ought to be horrified by the maltreatment of animals in Indonesia or anywhere else it occurs- and not just for the animals we export. But we must not allow Australia's vital national interests to be swayed, by a highly emotive program whose intentions- however good they may be- have the potential to damage our relations with the people and government of Indonesia.

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