

Challenges and Dialogue with the religious minorities about religious slaughter.

DIALREL is a European project funded by the European Commission (N°: FP6-2005-FOOD-4-C). It is coordinated by Dr. Mara Miele at Cardiff University and involves the collaboration of 11 partners based throughout Europe and in Turkey, Israel and Egypt. The project aims to promote best practices of slaughter, both conventional and religious, and to establish a dialogue among religious authorities and market operators about Halal and Kosher certification (see www.dialrel.eu).

Within Europe there are remarkable differences in slaughtering practices (both in terms regulation and actual practices) and this will present challenges for the homogenous implementation and enforcement of the new EU reg. 1099/2009, which is due to be implemented in 2013. Moreover religious slaughter is a complex topic that encompasses issues of animal welfare, freedom of religion and national sovereignty and it has recently gained more prominence in public debates due to great increases in the demand for Halal foods both in Europe and globally. This has led to a public debate on certification processes for products obtained by means of religious slaughter, however data regarding animals slaughtered according to religious rules is limited and not systematically collected. One of the objectives of the Dialrel project is to provide an overview of current regulations and practices in a sample of European countries. The project also aims to trace some of the major changes in the Halal and Kosher supply chains and to examine consumer demand for these products.

The DIALREL project aims to gather this information but most importantly it aims to encourage a dialogue about the welfare of animals at slaughter among religious authorities, veterinary authorities and key stakeholders working within the supply chain.

The DIALREL project consists of five areas of investigation (or 'workpackages'): the first workpackage reviews the development of current legislation, religious rules and scientific welfare concerns around animal slaughter. The second workpackage evaluates the current state of slaughter practices, both conventional and religious, by examining observed or reported incidences of optimum and adverse practices of slaughter techniques. Workpackage three investigates the concerns of Halal and Kosher consumers and the level of information available about religious slaughter in a sample of EU and associate countries. The fourth workpackage addresses the concerns, knowledge and information of the European public relating to religious slaughter practices and assesses the degrees of transparency in the meat distribution system for Halal and Shechita products. Finally, workpackage five is devoted to promoting a dialogue about religious slaughter between different groups and to identifying effective communication strategies. A key part of this activity has been the setting up of an Advisory Board consisting of key European stakeholders and other interested parties.

As part of the activities aimed at promoting a dialogue between different stakeholders in the Halal and Shechita supply chains, on December 9th 2010 the Dialrel project (in collaboration with the EU DG Sanco) organised a meeting in Brussels with the representatives of the project's Advisory Board. The meeting started with a welcome from the project coordinator Dr. Mara Miele (Cardiff University) and from Dr. Andrea Gavinelli (Head of the Animal Welfare Unit of DG-SANCO). Then Dr. Denis Simonin (DG-SANCO) illustrated the main aspects of the new

EU regulation. This was followed by a series of presentations regarding the results of the DIALREL project by team members.

Dr. Florence Bergeaud-Blackler (IREMAM, Maison Méditerranéenne des Sciences de l'Homme, Aix-en-Provence, France), coordinator of workpackage three, presented the results of the focus group discussions conducted with consumers of Kosher food in Belgium, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Israel. From this investigation it emerged that, despite little knowledge about the actual conditions of slaughter in industrial slaughterhouses, liberal, conservative and orthodox participants of focus groups showed a strong attachment to the Shechita method of slaughter. Amongst the reasons that participants offered for preferring this slaughter method, related to their belief that it minimized the pain experienced by animals. As a consequence focus group participants did not question the shekhita method but rather were inclined to question the welfare, economic or political motives behind introducing any stunning methods.

Dr. Adrian Evans (University of Cardiff, School of City and Regional Planning, Cardiff), drawing on the research of Dr. Vramo Lill (SIFO, Norway) presented the results of a study of the media coverage of issues related to religious slaughter and Halal and Kosher food in a sample of European countries (Germany, France, the United Kingdom and Norway). It emerged that whilst there was a lack of coverage of these issues within traditional media sources (e.g. newspapers), this was to some extent compensated by the availability of information through new media sources (in particular via the internet). Questions and issues concerning diversity and integration were part of the media debate in all study countries. The expanding market for halal was a very prominent theme, especially within the UK. Debates regarding kosher were, for various reasons, largely omitted from media debates within the four study countries. Dr. John Lever (University of Cardiff, School of City and Regional Planning, Cardiff), presented the first results of interviews with key actors in the Halal and Kosher food supply chains. He indicated that there are some major changes taking place, with a great expansion of the Halal market and a greater presence of these certified foods in major European supermarkets.

Dr. Rossella Bottoni (Milan University) presented an overview of the differences in religious slaughter legislation across Europe. Dr. Karen von Holleben (BSI, Beratungs und Schulungsinstitut für schonenden Umgang mit Zucht- und Schlachttieren, Schwarzenbek, Germany) presented the areas of concern for the welfare of animals at the time of slaughter from a veterinary point of view. She focused attention on both 'conventional' slaughter practices, in which 'stunning' is performed before the cut of the neck, and on religious practices, in which stunning is either performed in a reversible fashion, performed after the cut of the neck, or not performed.

Then Dr. Antonio Velarde (Animal Welfare Unit, IRTA, Spain), Dr. Haluk Anil (formerly in the Veterinary faculty of Bristol University, UK) and Prof. Beniamino Cenci Goga (Veterinary Faculty of Perugia University) presented the results of a recent questionnaire survey regarding the incidence and scale of current religious slaughter practices and of 'spot visits' (visits to slaughterhouses to examine current practices) in a selected sample of EU countries. These results highlighted great variations in current slaughter practices and, in certain cases, indicated the low level of enforcement of current regulations. Moreover, Dr. Antonio Velarde informed the

Advisory Board about a recent scientific workshop, held in Girona, Spain on the 3rd and 4th of February, where recommendations for improving the welfare of animals at the time of slaughter were thoroughly discussed with a group of scientists from Halal, Shechita and conventional animal science backgrounds. The recommendations generated from the discussions in this workshop will form part of the overall recommendations of the Dialrel project to the EU Commission for further initiatives in this area.

The members of the Advisory Board, which included representatives of the Muslim Council of Britain, Halal Food Authority, Shechita UK Board, Shechita France, FVE, Eurogroup for Animals, AVEC, EHZ (European Institute of Halal Certification) and UECBV (European Livestock and Meat Trade Union), showed great interest in the results produced and gave a great contribution to the debate, both underlining their different religious requirements and their commitment to explore possible strategies to improve the welfare of animals at the time of slaughter that would be consistent or acceptable with their religious requirements. Many members of the Advisory Board also pointed to the need for more transparency in meat supply chains and better information for the general public about religious slaughter and certification processes. The meeting ended with an invitation to continue this dialogue at the final Dialrel Workshop (due to take place on March 15th and 16th in Istanbul, Turkey) where the final recommendations of the project will be presented.