

Because animal welfare is important to me as well (and I am a regular donor to Heifer International, not just a member of the staff), I always share with people that our Project Partners are taught to care for animals in an environment that minimizes stress and satisfies the animals' behavioral and social needs. This is a significant component of the extensive training the families receive before receiving an animal gift (usually four to nine months of training and preparation before one animal is given in a project), and it is also part of the follow-up evaluation. Since all recipients of Heifer International animals contract to Pass on the Gift, (give their animal's offspring to another family in need) the whole community is attentive to the well-being of these precious, life-giving creatures.

Keep in mind that these animals are at the core of the project partners' livelihood. Project partners do not want to injure the animals and often develop very close bonds with them. The animals are assets, a source of income (from milk, eggs, wool, etc.) and food security, but they usually represent a poor family's life savings, annual income, family pet and member of the family all at once. We respect those who choose a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle where it is possible, but often such a choice would not fit the nutritional and economic situation faced by our partners or be culturally appropriate.

The vegetarian donors to Heifer's work, and there are many of them, believe in Heifer's model and understand that making the choice to be vegetarian is a luxury the rest of the world can rarely enjoy. In many developing countries, for the rural poor we work with, beans and legumes do not provide enough protein, legumes are too expensive, milk and dairy products are not available or are too expensive in their current situation, eggs are not available in the quantity needed or are too expensive in their current situation, and tofu and soy products are not available.

Through our learning centers and workshops especially, participants explore where their food comes from, the global implications of their food choices and the risks and benefits associated with food choices, such as organic vs. conventional, carnivores vs. vegetarian and local vs. global. We also try to educate Heifer supports about the ways that Heifer works both globally and domestically to support sustainable and just food systems with emerging farming alternatives, sustainable growing practices, and the benefits of small farms and urban food production. Through our educational programs and articles in the World Ark, we hope to inspire people to buy and prepare locally grown, seasonal foods (especially in the U.S.) to support a healthy, local food system and local agriculture.

In the United States and abroad, we work with small-scale local farmers who learn balanced, sustainable farming so that their farming enhances the environment and the lives of their animals. In much of the developing world, livestock a source of tremendous wealth but they also supplement protein poor diets, provide draft power, supply manure for biogas cooking and lamps, provide a quick yield of protein, help generate income and provide motivation for families, and are often deeply embedded in the cultural and indigenous traditions of local people

(such as cows and goats in African countries, pigs in Thailand, llamas in Bolivia, and guinea pigs in Ecuador). Heifer is not about meat, it is about respecting local dietary practices, enhancing animal wellbeing, and teaching communities how to live peacefully with their neighbors and the environment to achieve better nutrition, health, education, better quality of life, and opportunities for development.

For full disclosure, I am not a vegetarian but have found myself making better choices for my family about eating fresh, local, and often organic food (vegetables, fruit, dairy, tofu, and meat) because of what I have learned through Heifer's work. And, I hope donors, volunteers, and supporters are doing the same as they learn more about food and food production and distribution.

I hope this helps add to the conversation with Worldbuilders fans and others who are interested in Heifer's work.

Vicki Clarke  
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