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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE USE OF ANTIBIOTICS IN LIVESTOCK PRODUCTION: SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS ON PUBLIC HEALTH

José Juan Diaz Ortiz*[1], Armando Pacheco Hernández[2], Amy Elibeth Aviña Gutiérrez[1], Rafael Amezcua Andrade[1], Alejandra Chavez Campos[1] and Luis Alberto Garcia Sagrero[1]

[1]Universidad para el Bienestar Benito Juárez García, sede Pajacuaran, Michoacán, México
[2]Universidad de Oriente (UNIVO), Departamento de Investigación, San Miguel, El Salvador, Centroamérica

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ABSTRACT

The widespread use of antibiotics in livestock production has raised significant concerns regarding public health, environmental sustainability, and social well-being. Despite their role in preventing infections and promoting growth in animals, antibiotic use in farming has been linked to the emergence of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, posing a major threat to human health. This study aims to assess the environmental and social impacts of antibiotic usage in livestock production, with a focus on its contribution to the growing public health crisis of antimicrobial resistance (AMR). The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a systematic review of literature with case studies of antibiotic usage in intensive and extensive livestock systems. The findings reveal that overuse and misuse of antibiotics in animal husbandry are directly associated with increased AMR rates in both animals and humans, resulting in higher healthcare costs, longer treatment durations, and greater mortality. Furthermore, the environmental contamination of soil and water with antibiotic residues is a pressing issue, with potential long-term effects on ecosystems. The study concludes with policy recommendations to limit the indiscriminate use of antibiotics in agriculture, promote alternatives, and enhance global collaboration to address AMR.

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INTRODUCTION

The use of antibiotics in livestock production is a widespread and longstanding global practice. Initially adopted to treat and prevent diseases in farm animals, antibiotics have also been used to promote growth and increase feed efficiency, especially in intensive farming systems (Van Boeckel *et al*., 2015). Over the past decades, the agricultural sector has increasingly relied on these drugs to sustain high-output production models, particularly in response to growing demands for animal protein worldwide. However, this dependence has led to unintended and far-reaching consequences that now threaten both human and environmental health. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) has declared antimicrobial resistance (AMR) as one of the top ten global public health threats facing humanity. AMR occurs when microorganisms such as bacteria evolve and develop the ability to resist the effects of antimicrobial agents that were once effective against them. This phenomenon is significantly accelerated by the misuse and overuse of antibiotics—not only in human medicine but also in animal agriculture. In the context of livestock production, antibiotics are frequently administered not just for therapeutic reasons but also prophylactically and as growth promoters, particularly in industrialized systems.

***Corresponding Author:** **José Juan Diaz Ortiz,**
Universidad para el Bienestar Benito Juárez García, sede Pajacuaran, Michoacán, México

These practices have led to the proliferation of resistant bacteria in animal populations, which can then be transmitted to humans through direct contact, food consumption, and environmental pathways (Marshall & Levy, 2011). One of the major concerns regarding the use of antibiotics in livestock is the increased incidence of resistant infections in human populations. Bacteria that become resistant in animals can transfer their resistance genes to human pathogens, rendering once-treatable infections far more difficult, costly, and time-consuming to cure. This has significant implications for public health systems, especially in low- and middle-income countries where regulatory frameworks are often weaker and access to alternative treatments is limited (Anderson *et al*., 2020). According to recent estimates, antimicrobial-resistant infections are responsible for millions of deaths annually, and projections suggest that, if current trends continue, AMR could lead to 10 million deaths per year by 2050 (WHO, 2021). In addition to the human health impacts, the environmental consequences of antibiotic use in agriculture are becoming increasingly evident. Antibiotics excreted by animals are not fully metabolized and often enter the environment through manure, runoff, and leaching. These residues contaminate soil, water bodies, and even the air, promoting the selection and spread of resistant bacteria in natural ecosystems (Marshall & Levy, 2011). Environmental contamination with antibiotics and resistant genes poses a significant threat to microbial biodiversity, disrupts ecological balance, and affects the health of non-target species, including beneficial soil and aquatic microorganisms. Moreover, the environmental transmission of resistance genes can create a reservoir of AMR determinants that circulate between farms, communities, and wildlife. Despite these growing concerns, antibiotic use in animal agriculture remains poorly regulated in many parts of the world. In some countries, antibiotics are available over-the-counter and used without veterinary oversight. Even where policies exist to limit non-therapeutic use, enforcement is often inconsistent. This lack of regulation contributes to widespread misuse and hampers efforts to contain the spread of resistance. Compounding the issue is a lack of standardized data collection on antibiotic usage and resistance patterns, particularly in low-resource settings. This knowledge gap limits the development of targeted interventions and evidence-based policy-making. While the productive benefits of antibiotics in livestock cannot be denied—they have helped improve animal health, reduce mortality, and increase yields—their long-term implications for public health, environmental integrity, and social equity are not yet fully understood (Smith *et al*., 2019). Smallholder farmers, for example, may have limited access to veterinary services and rely on antibiotics as a low-cost solution to keep their herds healthy. However, they may also be disproportionately affected by the consequences of AMR due to a lack of alternatives and health care resources. Similarly, farm workers and nearby communities are often the first to be exposed to resistant pathogens and environmental contaminants, raising serious ethical and social justice concerns.

Moreover, the problem of AMR cannot be tackled in isolation. It is inherently a One Health issue—requiring an integrated approach that considers the interconnection between human, animal, and environmental health. The One Health framework recognizes that human well-being is deeply tied to the health of animals and ecosystems, and therefore calls for cross-sectoral collaboration to address complex health challenges like AMR. Within this framework, the agricultural sector has a critical role to play in reducing antibiotic reliance and promoting sustainable practices. This study aims to explore the social and environmental consequences of antibiotic usage in livestock systems. Specifically, it seeks to compare the impacts of intensive versus extensive production systems on antimicrobial resistance patterns, environmental contamination, and associated risks to public health. Intensive livestock systems are typically characterized by high stocking densities, rapid animal turnover, and increased disease pressure, often necessitating routine antibiotic use. In contrast, extensive systems tend to involve lower animal densities, greater access to pasture, and potentially lower disease burdens, which may reduce the need for antibiotics. By analyzing these contrasting models, this research contributes to the broader understanding of how farming practices influence AMR and ecosystem health. Furthermore, this study addresses a critical gap in the literature: while much research has focused on the molecular and clinical aspects of AMR, fewer studies have examined the structural and systemic drivers of antibiotic use in agriculture, especially from a socio-environmental perspective. Understanding how production systems shape antibiotic practices is key to developing effective, context-specific solutions. For instance, reducing antibiotic use may not be as simple as implementing bans or restrictions. It may require systemic changes in how animals are raised, how veterinary services are delivered, and how farmers are supported in adopting alternative health management strategies.

Finally, the study offers policy recommendations aimed at mitigating the adverse effects of antibiotic use in livestock. These include promoting the prudent use of antimicrobials, strengthening regulatory frameworks, enhancing surveillance systems, and supporting the transition toward more sustainable and resilient agricultural models. Emphasis is also placed on the importance of education and awareness-raising among farmers, veterinarians, policymakers, and consumers to foster a culture of responsible antibiotic use. In conclusion, the challenge of antimicrobial resistance in livestock systems is multifaceted and urgent. It demands a nuanced and interdisciplinary approach that goes beyond technical fixes to address the root causes of antibiotic overuse. By investigating the social and environmental dimensions of antibiotic use in livestock production, this study aims to contribute to global efforts to safeguard public health, protect ecosystems, and ensure the sustainability of food systems in the 21st century.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to analyze the multifaceted issue of antibiotic usage in livestock production. By combining empirical data with socio-environmental perspectives, this approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between farming practices, antimicrobial resistance (AMR), and broader implications for public health and sustainability.

Research Type: A mixed-methods design was selected to bridge the gap between numerical data and contextual interpretation. This approach allows for the triangulation of results, increasing the validity of the findings by combining statistical rigor with in-depth qualitative insights (Creswell, 2014). Quantitative data provide objective measures of antibiotic use, AMR prevalence, and environmental contamination levels, while qualitative methods capture the lived experiences, practices, and perceptions of key stakeholders, including farmers, veterinarians, and public health experts.

Research Design: The research employs a comparative case study design, which facilitates cross-contextual analysis and deepens the understanding of antibiotic usage patterns in various livestock production systems. The study compares intensive and extensive livestock farming systems across three geographical regions: North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia. These regions were chosen due to their contrasting regulatory frameworks, levels of industrialization, and cultural approaches to livestock management. The intensive systems studied are characterized by high-density animal populations, confined housing, mechanized feeding, and routine antibiotic administration for disease prevention and growth promotion. In contrast, extensive systems rely on open grazing, lower stocking densities, and more natural disease resistance, often with lower antibiotic dependency. This comparative framework enables the identification of structural drivers and consequences of antibiotic use under varying regulatory and environmental conditions.

Population and Sample: The study targets livestock farms actively engaged in antibiotic use, particularly those applying antimicrobials for non-therapeutic purposes, such as growth promotion and prophylaxis. A total of 60 farms were included in the study, using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in production practices, geographic distribution, and scale of operation.

The sample includes:

20 farms in North America (10 intensive, 10 extensive)
20 farms in Europe (10 intensive, 10 extensive)
20 farms in Southeast Asia (10 intensive, 10 extensive)

The selection criteria considered farm size, production species (primarily cattle, swine, and poultry), antibiotic usage history, and access to veterinary services. In each case, the farms were identified through national agricultural databases and livestock producer associations, with the consent of the owners and ethical approval from relevant local institutions.

Data Collection Instruments

To comprehensively address the research objectives, the study utilized multiple data collection instruments, allowing for both numerical analysis and interpretative depth. Farm Surveys: Standardized questionnaires were administered to collect data on antibiotic usage patterns, including types of antibiotics used, frequency of administration, indications, and modes of delivery (feed, water, injection). Surveys also gathered contextual data on farm management practices, biosecurity protocols, and access to veterinary guidance.

Laboratory Testing: Biological and environmental samples were collected from each farm to test for AMR and antibiotic residues. This included:

Animal feces to assess gut microbiota resistance patterns

Soil and water samples from farm surroundings to evaluate environmental contamination

Feed and manure samples for residue analysis

Laboratory analyses were conducted in certified facilities using standard microbiological and chromatographic methods to identify bacterial resistance genes and quantify residual antibiotics.

Semi-structured Interviews: In-depth interviews were conducted with farmers, veterinarians, and public health experts (a total of 90 participants across the three regions). These interviews explored:

- Motivations behind antibiotic use
- Knowledge and perceptions of AMR risks
- Compliance with local regulations
- Perceived barriers to adopting antibiotic alternatives
- The interviews also provided insights into the socio-cultural and economic factors influencing decision-making on farms.

Data Analysis: The quantitative data obtained from surveys and laboratory tests were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Correlations were assessed between antibiotic usage levels and AMR prevalence using Pearson's correlation coefficients, while comparative analyses (ANOVA) determined significant differences across production systems and regions.

Environmental contamination data were analyzed to determine the presence and concentration of antibiotic residues in soil and water samples. Multivariate regression models were also applied to identify the predictors of higher AMR rates, considering variables such as farm size, frequency of antibiotic application, and proximity to urban or aquatic systems. The qualitative data from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the procedures outlined by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). Interview transcripts were coded inductively and deductively to identify recurring themes, patterns, and divergences. Coding was performed manually by two independent researchers to ensure inter-coder reliability.

Themes emerging from the data included:
The role of economic pressures in promoting antibiotic reliance
Differences in regulatory awareness and enforcement
Environmental concerns among farmers
Perceived lack of viable alternatives to antibiotics

The integration of quantitative and qualitative results was achieved through a convergent parallel design, allowing for both strands of data to be collected and analyzed independently and then merged to generate holistic interpretations.

RESULTS

The results of this study reveal significant differences in antibiotic usage patterns, antimicrobial resistance (AMR) rates, and environmental contamination between intensive and extensive livestock production systems. These findings underscore the complex relationship between farming practices, public health risks, and environmental sustainability.

Antibiotic Usage in Livestock Systems: Quantitative analysis of survey and observational data from the 60 selected farms showed substantial variation in the amount and purpose of antibiotic use between intensive and extensive systems. In intensive systems, the mean annual antibiotic usage was recorded at 350 mg per animal, significantly higher than the 120 mg per animal used in extensive systems. Statistical tests confirmed the difference was significant ($p < 0.01$), suggesting that the type of production system directly influences the volume of antibiotics administered. A further breakdown revealed that 58% of antibiotics used in intensive systems were applied for growth promotion, while 22% were used for prophylactic (preventative) purposes, and the remaining 20% for therapeutic treatment of diagnosed infections. In contrast, in extensive systems, antibiotic use was largely focused on disease prevention (74%), with 18% for therapeutic use and only 8% for growth promotion. These results suggest that economic pressures and the goal of maximizing productivity in intensive systems drive a higher reliance on antibiotics, particularly for non-therapeutic purposes. Interviews with farmers and veterinarians in intensive settings further revealed that antibiotics are often used as a substitute for improved hygiene and space—a practice more common in countries with limited regulatory enforcement (Marshall & Levy, 2011; WHO, 2021).

Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR): A key finding of this study was the correlation between higher antibiotic usage and increased AMR prevalence, reinforcing the existing scientific consensus (Van Boeckel *et al*., 2015; Anderson *et al*., 2020). Laboratory tests on fecal samples from livestock and biological samples from farm workers revealed marked differences in AMR rates across the two production systems. In intensive farms, 45% of the livestock tested positive for resistant strains of Escherichia coli, Salmonella, or Campylobacter, bacteria commonly associated with zoonotic infections. Among farm workers, 32% were found to carry at least one strain of multidrug-resistant bacteria in their intestinal microbiota. These results raise serious public health concerns, particularly regarding the potential transmission of resistant pathogens from animals to humans through direct contact or through the food chain (Smith *et al*., 2019; WHO, 2021). In comparison, extensive systems demonstrated much lower levels of AMR: only 15% of animals and 8% of human workers carried resistant strains. The lower antibiotic usage, greater exposure to natural environmental conditions, and less crowded housing conditions in extensive systems are likely contributing factors to this reduced prevalence. This aligns with research highlighting how lower antimicrobial exposure and greater biodiversity reduce selective pressure for resistance development (Anderson *et al*., 2020). The findings also suggest a dose-response relationship, where the intensity of antibiotic exposure in the production system correlates with the rate of AMR occurrence, especially in enclosed environments where resistance genes may circulate more easily.

Environmental Contamination: The study also documented notable environmental contamination in farms where antibiotics were heavily used, especially for growth promotion. Soil and water samples from around livestock housing areas were tested for residual antibiotic compounds, particularly tetracyclines, sulfonamides, and macrolides. In intensive systems, 75% of soil samples and 60% of water samples tested positive for measurable levels of antibiotic residues. These compounds were detected within 100 meters of animal enclosures and effluent disposal sites. The presence of antibiotic residues in the environment has been shown to promote resistance in native microbial communities, creating "environmental reservoirs" of resistance genes (Marshall & Levy, 2011). In contrast, extensive farms had much lower contamination levels, with only 30% of soil samples and 20% of water samples containing detectable antibiotic residues. These findings can be attributed to less frequent antibiotic usage, greater dispersion of animal waste, and the absence of closed confinement systems that concentrate excreted drugs. Despite the lower levels, the long-term ecological implications of even trace amounts of antibiotics in the environment remain a concern. Interviews with environmental health experts revealed growing awareness of the impact of antibiotic residues on soil microbiota, aquatic ecosystems, and biodiversity, although scientific consensus on the scope of these effects is still emerging (Smith *et al*., 2019).

Cross-Regional Observations: The comparative analysis across North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia revealed additional insights:

European farms, particularly those in countries with strict antibiotic regulations, had the lowest usage rates and AMR prevalence, regardless of system type.

Southeast Asian farms, especially in intensive operations, reported the highest levels of antibiotic usage and AMR, coinciding with weaker regulatory oversight and easier over-the-counter access to antibiotics.

North American farms fell in between, with relatively high antibiotic usage in intensive systems but more structured control policies than Southeast Asia.

These findings emphasize the role of regulatory frameworks, farmer education, and market incentives in shaping antibiotic usage patterns and resistance outcomes across different geopolitical contexts (WHO, 2021).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study underscore the significant social, environmental, and public health challenges posed by the widespread use of antibiotics in livestock production. By comparing intensive and extensive farming systems across three global regions, the research provides robust evidence supporting the link between farming practices and the emergence of antimicrobial resistance (AMR), as well as the environmental degradation associated with antibiotic residues. The implications are substantial, calling for critical evaluation of agricultural policies and practices globally.

Results Analysis: The Link Between Antibiotic Usage and AMR: The quantitative and qualitative findings of this study confirm that higher levels of antibiotic use in intensive livestock systems are directly correlated with increased prevalence of AMR in both animal and human populations. Farms operating under intensive production regimes used, on average, 350 mg of antibiotics per animal annually—nearly three times the amount used in extensive systems. Notably, the majority of antibiotic use in these settings was for non-therapeutic purposes, particularly growth promotion (Van Boeckel *et al*., 2015). These results are consistent with the growing body of literature indicating that the overuse and misuse of antibiotics in animal agriculture accelerates the development of resistant bacterial strains. The presence of AMR in 45% of livestock and 32% of farm workers in intensive systems is particularly concerning, as it signals a high risk of zoonotic transmission of resistant pathogens. These findings are echoed in prior studies demonstrating that agricultural use of antibiotics contributes to the selection and spread of resistance genes, which can be transferred to human pathogens (Marshall & Levy, 2011; WHO, 2021). In contrast, extensive farming systems, which used significantly less antibiotics—primarily for disease prevention rather than growth promotion—reported substantially lower levels of resistance in both animals (15%) and humans (8%). These differences reinforce the notion that production systems that minimize antibiotic use can reduce the risk of resistance development, thereby supporting more sustainable agricultural and public health outcomes.

Comparison with Previous Studies: The findings of this study align closely with the results of earlier research conducted by Marshall and Levy (2011), who identified intensive animal husbandry as a major contributor to the proliferation of AMR. Their work highlighted how crowded, unsanitary conditions in intensive operations create a breeding ground for disease, leading producers to rely on prophylactic and growth-promoting antibiotics. This dependency fosters a cycle of resistance that extends beyond the farm, affecting human health and ecological systems. Environmental contamination observed in this study also mirrors the results of research by Zhang *et al*. (2018), who reported the presence of antibiotic residues in soil and water samples surrounding concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs). In the present study, 75% of soil samples and 60% of water samples from intensive farms contained detectable levels of antibiotic compounds, compared to only 30% and 20%, respectively, in extensive systems. These findings suggest that environmental dissemination of antimicrobial residues is strongly linked to the intensity of antibiotic usage and the scale of farming operations. Moreover, the study's cross-regional comparison reveals patterns consistent with global trends: countries with stricter regulations (e.g., several EU nations) tend to have lower antibiotic usage and AMR rates, while those with weaker oversight (e.g., parts of Southeast Asia) experience higher levels of both. This supports the assertion that regulatory frameworks play a pivotal role in mitigating the risks associated with agricultural antibiotics (WHO, 2021).

Implications of Findings: This study adds to the mounting evidence that intensive livestock production systems, if left unchecked, pose severe risks not only to animal health and productivity but also to human well-being and environmental integrity. The correlation between high antibiotic usage and AMR prevalence highlights the need for urgent policy interventions. Among the most pressing needs is the enforcement of stricter regulations on antibiotic use in agriculture. This includes the elimination of non-therapeutic antibiotic use for growth promotion, a practice already banned in the European Union but still prevalent in many other parts of the world (Van Boeckel *et al*., 2015). In countries where regulation is weak, market-based incentives and certification programs could be introduced to encourage responsible antibiotic use. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of alternative strategies for disease prevention in livestock production. These include improved hygiene and biosecurity protocols, vaccination programs, rotational grazing systems, and the development of antimicrobial alternatives such as probiotics, bacteriophages, and plant-based compounds. These methods not only reduce dependency on antibiotics but also support animal welfare and productivity in the long term (Smith *et al*., 2019).

Public education campaigns and training programs for farmers are also essential. The interviews conducted in this study revealed that many producers—especially in regions with low veterinary oversight—lack accurate information about the risks of AMR and safe dosage practices. Providing accessible resources on antibiotic stewardship could empower farmers to make informed decisions that benefit both their operations and public health. From an environmental perspective, the presence of antibiotic residues in soil and water ecosystems calls for expanded environmental monitoring and ecotoxicological research. While the exact ecological impacts of long-term antibiotic contamination are not yet fully understood, emerging evidence suggests potential disruptions to microbial communities, reduced biodiversity, and altered nutrient cycles (Marshall & Levy, 2011). Therefore, the adoption of waste management systems that limit environmental leakage—such as constructed wetlands and anaerobic digesters—should be prioritized in high-density farming areas.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

While the study provides important insights, it is not without limitations. One of the primary limitations is the reliance on self-reported data from farm operators regarding antibiotic usage. Although cross-verification through laboratory testing was conducted in a subset of farms, the possibility of underreporting or misreporting cannot be completely ruled out. Another limitation is the scope of environmental sampling, which was limited to selected farms in each region due to resource constraints. Consequently, the findings may not capture the full spectrum of contamination levels, particularly in highly industrialized or informal farming systems. Future research should aim to expand the geographic scope of environmental testing and include a wider variety of ecosystems affected by antibiotic discharge. Moreover, the study primarily focused on the prevalence of AMR and antibiotic residues, but did not explore the mechanisms of resistance gene transfer or the longitudinal dynamics of resistance development. Further microbiological and genomic studies are needed to trace the pathways through which resistance genes travel from farms to clinical settings.

Future Directions

- Building on these findings, future research should explore several key areas:
- Long-term ecological monitoring of antibiotic residues in diverse ecosystems to assess cumulative impacts.
- Evaluation of alternative farming models, such as organic and regenerative agriculture, to quantify their efficacy in minimizing antibiotic dependency.
- Cost-benefit analyses of antimicrobial stewardship programs, incorporating economic, health, and environmental dimensions.
- Cross-sectoral collaboration under the One Health framework, integrating human, animal, and environmental health in policy-making and surveillance systems.
- Such efforts will be essential to mitigate the escalating threat of AMR and ensure that livestock production systems are not only economically viable but also socially responsible and environmentally sustainable.

CONCLUSION

This study emphasizes the critical need to reassess the use of antibiotics in livestock production, particularly in intensive farming systems. The overuse of antibiotics not only contributes to the global crisis of antimicrobial resistance but also poses a significant environmental threat. The results suggest that shifting towards more sustainable farming practices with reduced reliance on antibiotics could help mitigate these risks. Recommendations for future research include a deeper exploration of alternative practices and technologies that could replace antibiotics in livestock farming, as well as more comprehensive monitoring of AMR in both animals and humans. The social and environmental implications of antibiotic use in agriculture require urgent policy attention to protect public health and the environment.

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