The Scientific, Legal, and Ethical Failures of Street Dog Relocation

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Introduction

There are several reasons why removal of free-living dogs is unsound for the Indian milieu. In this document, we present them under five headings.

1. Legal and Regulatory Non-Compliance in India
2. Ecological Disruption and Scientific Ineffectiveness
3. Undermining Public Health and Rabies Control
4. Severe Ethical and Welfare Risks
5. Cultural & Social Considerations

We offer our recommendations in the conclusion.

1. Legal and Regulatory Non-Compliance in India

Relocation or removal of free-living dogs directly conflicts with Indian law and regulatory frameworks governing animal management.

- **Mandate for In-Situ Release:** The **Animal Birth Control (ABC) Rules, 2023**[1] (notified under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960), are legally binding statutory rules for managing street dog populations. Rule 7 explicitly requires sterilised and vaccinated dogs to be released back into the same locality where they were captured.
- **Defining Illegal Removal:** Removal and transport of free-roaming dogs away from their original territory, ward, or municipality without return is considered illegal relocation, except for temporary removal for medical treatment or in the event of a declared emergency where dogs cannot safely remain in situ.
- **Contradiction of Policy:** The official government position and the mandate by WHO states that sterilization and vaccination programs are “the only rational and scientific solution” for stray dog population control. The regulatory framework does not sanction indiscriminate relocation to new wards or localities.
- **Opposition to Mass Elimination:** Proposals advocating for "zero tolerance for homelessness" or blanket removal are not legally permitted and violate the ethical framework under which India operates animal welfare policy.

2. Ecological Disruption and Scientific Ineffectiveness

Relocation fails because it ignores fundamental dog ecology and behavior, leading to a counterproductive cycle of instability and conflict. Consider this excerpt from the paper titled 'The Success of ABC-ARV program in India[2]' : "Section 218 of The Madras City MunicipalCorporation Act of 1919 authorised catching and killing any dog on the street which did not have a licence tag…The number of dogs being killed by the Corporation continued to rise after this period. So did the number of dogs on the street and so did the number of cases of human rabies deaths."

- **The Vacuum Effect[3]:** Free-living dogs (FLDs) are territorial, establishing home ranges linked to resources like food and shelter. When dogs are suddenly removed, their territories become vacant, creating a "population vacuum". The Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI) manual warns that leaving vacant territories leads to the influx of new, often unvaccinated/unneutered, dogs migrating into the area. These dogs also multiply at a faster rate?
- **Destabilization and Conflict:** This influx destabilises the established social structures of the local dog population, which leads to increased stress and conflict. The new, unfamiliar dogs are more likely to cause bites and conflict compared to the stable, known community dogs.
- **Homing Behaviour Risk:** Dogs often exhibit strong site fidelity and attempt to navigate back to their original territory after displacement. These homing attempts expose them to a high risk of injury, road traffic, and conflict with other dogs and humans.
- **Worsened Human-Animal Conflict:** Mass removal programs can shape the remaining dog population into one that is more wary and reactive toward humans, which actually *increases* the probability of conflict and defensive biting, as being observed in Kerala[4].

3. Undermining Public Health and Rabies Control

Relocation works against public health goals, primarily by disrupting successful vaccination strategies.

- **Loss of Herd Immunity**: An effective rabies control strategy includes mass dog vaccination covering 70% of dogs in a given population, which will maintain herd immunity[5]. Removing vaccinated dogs breaks the immunisation cohort and fragments the coverage, allowing new, unvaccinated dogs to move in and reintroduce risk[6]. This has been observed in several places including Thailand[7], South Africa[8], Chad[9]. Consider the example of Kelusa, Bali[10], where there was a village-wide cull and yet cases of rabies were reported within days.
- **Rabies eradication** is indeed feasible in contrast to many other zoonoses, and is considered a 'model zoonotic diseases' where an 'One Health' approach is shown to be most effective, especially in low and middle-income countries. India has the potential to set an example in this regard, if done systematically and scientifically.[11]
- **Disease Spread to New Areas:** Relocated dogs, particularly if they are unvaccinated or unmonitored, carry the risk of spreading rabies or other zoonoses to the new areas they are moved to.
- **Epidemic Risk:** Mass destruction or sudden removal of dogs can lead to drastic and undesirable changes in the urban ecosystem. For instance, dog populations are used to keep rat populations in check[12] and removal of species like dogs or cats, can increase the population of rats[13]. Rat populations have been tied to outbreaks of leptospirosis and plague. Rodents, unlike dogs, cannot be caught and vaccinated. Thus a dramatic increase in their population increases risk of not just epidemics like leptospirosis (Fiji[14], Taiwan[15], and Malaysia[16]) and plague (Surat, India, 1994[17]), but also novel diseases, which present a higher risk of pandemics. The vacuum effect could, in some parts of the country, increase the population of other animals such as monkeys, mongooses, snakes, jackals, etc. which again cannot be as easily captured, neutered and vaccinated, further increasing human-exposure to novel zoonosis, as well as increasing human-animal conflict.
- **International concerns** : We are now aware that exposure to novel pathogens that can transmit to humans, given certain conditions, can result in pandemics that transcend country borders. Sudden exposure to a larger number of rodents, brings along with risk of novel diseases. The most recent pandemic is fresh in people's minds and can cause anxiety around potential pandemic risk situations being deliberately created in India by going against WHO recommendations on addressing the free-living dog population.
- **Monitoring Gaps:** Relocation severely increases the complexity of tracking dogs and monitoring outcomes (survival, movement, bite incidents). A lack of standardized post-relocation metrics makes impact evaluation nearly impossible.

4. Severe Ethical and Welfare Risks

Relocation often contravenes established humane standards and increases suffering for animals, undermining their welfare.

- **Increased Mortality and Stress:** Relocation removes dogs from known sources of food and shelter and breaks their established social support networks (including community feeders). This leads to high stress, physical trauma, risk of starvation, and attacks by resident dogs in the new territory, often resulting in increased mortality rates.
- **Community Resistance:** Relocated dogs may lack the vital acceptance and support provided by local communities and feeders. This resistance can manifest as increased conflict, welfare concerns, poisoning, or abandonment by residents in the new area.
- **Impractical Sheltering:** The sheer scale of the free-living dog population in India (millions) makes mass sheltering impractical. Attempts at large-scale confinement often lead to overcrowded shelters, resulting in high disease transmission (e.g., distemper, parvovirus), stress-related aggression, neglect, and mass deaths, which often subjects the dogs to worse conditions than they faced on the street, where they frequently receive care from dedicated community members.

5. Cultural & Social Considerations

India, today, is beginning to appreciate and emphasise the Indian knowledge system, which is being implemented across the country due to NEP 2020. However, it is important to note that a knowledge system, particularly one like the traditional Bharatiya knowledge system is not just about the academic curriculum or a collection of treatises, formulae or stories. It encompasses the ethos and culture of the civilisation that is a product of an extensive history and amalgamation of rituals, beliefs, mythologies, folklore and lifestyles into learning and knowledge production. Indian culture[18] has been one of empathy and inclusivity, nurturing diversity and respecting all life forms from the smallest herbs[19] to the largest mammals[20]. Free-living dogs have been a part of this culture since time immemorial, as is evident in the legend of Sarama[21], or the dog that followed the Pandavas to heaven in the Mahabharata.

Furthermore, India has always been a country that is tolerant of animals, including free-living dogs. Removing them is against the very ethos of the country and can hurt the religious and spiritual sentiments of people, which can lead to social disruptions, as witnessed in the past[22] and currently. It is well documented that the Mumbai riots of 1832 were a result of the attempt by the British Raj to eradicate free-living dogs. The current situation is cause for worry. The order to remove these animals is not only deepening polarisations in society but also those who feed / care for these animals are facing harassment and human rights violations. There is an increase in crimes against women, who often are the feeders/caregivers. In addition, there is an increase in animal rights violations & cruelty fraying the fabric of our society and setting people up for "civil war" scenarios with citizens taking the law in their own hands out of rage or helplessness.

And last, but not the least, it is a well studied phenomenon that humans are known to create attachment with dogs, that is oxytocin mediated and mimics the bond between a mother and child[23]. Thus the separation of dogs from the humans they are bonded to, creates distress that is biologically similar to that of separating a child from a mother[24]. Causing this level of distress among the vast number of feeders and caregivers can cause severe distress to the population at large.

Examining the existing ABC-ARV program

Contrary to common beliefs, the success of the Indian approach in addressing health and safety concerns related to street dogs is commendable and should indeed serve as a model, considering the approach was first introduced in India and has hence become the WHO recommendation. Consider the following points :

- A nationwide survey shows a dramatic drop in dog bites incidence from 17 per 1000 persons in 2003 to 5.6 per 1000 persons in 2023.[25]
- As per the Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme, dog bite numbers have declined by 50.89%
- Human rabies cases have dropped 20,565 in 2003[26] to 5276 in 2023[27], a sharp drop of 75%

It is also important to note that in more recent times, surveillance reporting of bites and rabies has gotten better and hence the decline we see is likely to be larger than the data suggests. It is also important to note that these declines have been seen in the last two decades, since India stopped mass removal programs. Stabilisation of the population via ABC programs and gradually building herd immunity by vaccinating more than 70% of the dogs, without mass removals to disrupt the healthy population has helped achieve this. Removal of dogs will disrupt this and undo the progress painstakingly achieved over the last two decades.

It is also important to note that the program can be improved significantly by empowering on-ground caregivers to befriend dogs and bring them in for ABC-ARV programs. Static point administration of these programs reduces the need for catchers, giving higher degree of coverage of the program[28] and bringing down cost and making the entire program more feasible[29]. It encourages public-private partnership, with the community empowered to take on the responsibility to stabilise the population in their area and create herd immunity rapidly. And lastly, the use of oral rabies vaccine, by simply handing it out to dogs in baits is shown to increase coverage by 4 times[30]. Feasibility tests have been completed for India[31] and it is pending approvals.

All of these suggest that eradicating this disease in a cost effective and humane way is indeed feasible, if we stay the current course, with minor improvements.

Conclusion: The Validated Solution

Instead of removal, the evidence overwhelmingly supports **in-situ CNVR** (Catch-Neuter-Vaccinate-Release) as the humane, legal, and effective core strategy. Successful programs, such as those in Jaipur and Goa, the JNU campus and several residential areas in pockets of South Delhi demonstrate that consistent CNVR implementation, targeting at least 70% coverage, leads to stable or declining populations and the eradication of rabies. This approach promotes coexistence by validating citizen care, which makes dogs approachable for vaccination and integration into public health efforts.

In addition, based on on-ground experience of welfare workers, we present an SOP to address human-dog conflict (bites) and preventative measures to avoid such conflict. These are recommendations based on decades of on ground experience and expertise based on research on free-living dogs of India. They are in-situ solutions developed for the Indian context and thus are affordable, practical and effective.

The ABC program of India is recognised as a milestone in the World Environment History[32]. Prior to the introduction of this program, the number of dogs electrocuted by the Corporation and the number of human rabies deaths had been steadily going up each year but the cases of rabies began a dramatic decline from the time the ABC-ARV programme was introduced. From a reported 120 deaths in 1996, cases of human rabies fell to zero in 2007 in Chennai[33]. It was the success of this programme in Madras that made the Government of India go in for the ABC Rules.

ABC with CVNR is an Athmanirbar program that was launched in India and is now a WHO recommendation. This program should be further strengthened and not disrupted.

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Endnotes

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