

What's on the Menu?



A comparative analysis of the agenda-setting dynamics of sustainable meat and fish in four European countries

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About this volume

This book collects the research papers that were written in the context of the 300-level course Public policy analysis which was taught in the spring semester of 2010. Reproduction and distribution of this material is allowed provided the source is acknowledged in the following way.

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Chapter 1

Studying the agenda-setting dynamics of sustainable food

Herman Lelieveldt

‘If I would solely lend my ear to environmental pressure groups, there would not be one single farmer left’

Dutch Minister for Agriculture Gerda Verburg, NOVA-TV, April 28, 2010

Introduction

In Western Europe attention for a sustainable production of food has increased in the last decade (Fresco 2008, Yaklokleva and Flynn 2009). While issues surrounding the organic production of food and fair trade are prominent amongst these, a recent wave of attention has focused on the impact of the production of meat and fish (animal protein). The FAO report ‘Livestock’s long shadow’ has provided an important stimulus for considering the impact of the production of meat, while the increased decline of fish catches has led to concerns on the sustainability of fisheries. Awareness about the negative impacts of the consumption of animal protein seems to be definitely on the rise. Since 2006, two seats in the Dutch parliament are occupied by the Party for the Animals, which has been very active in addressing all kinds of issues regarding the welfare of animals and the impact of fish and meat consumption on the environment. In the 2007 documentary *Meat the Truth*, Marianne Thieme, the leader of the party, retells Al Gore’s story about climate change by highlighting the impact of cattle farming. In the fall of 2009 the Dutch Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL) for the first time included an assessment of the environmental impact of animal protein consumption in its annual Environmental Balance. Finally, in April 2010 100 full professors

from all disciplines published an open letter and manifest for more sustainable livestock farming (www.duurzameveeteelt.nl).

All these events seem to suggest that things are moving ahead when it comes to devoting attention to the impact of eating meat and fish. But are these merely snippets that do not reflect a systematic increase in attention, or is there indeed a rise in awareness? Who is paying attention to these things: the general public, governments, the media, environmental NGOs, the food sector? And to what extent do we see these concerns reflected in government policies? Is this only happening in a few countries, or is it part of a broader international development?

This study explores the attention for the sustainable production and consumption of animal proteins from the perspective of public policy analysis. An important sub-discipline within public policy is concerned with monitoring and tracing attention to issues by studying agenda-setting processes in decision-making. (Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen and Jones 2008; Kingdon 1995). Issues are said to be on the agenda if they are seriously considered by the actors that form part of that agenda. Agenda-setting studies distinguish between three different types of agendas: the media-agenda consisting of news outlets (newspapers, radio and tv), public agenda (public concern as witnessed by public opinion as well as the activities and concerns of interest groups), and the formal/governmental agenda (consisting of the formal decision-makers in politics such as governments and parliaments).

Agenda-setting studies try to understand how issues move on and off as well as between these different agendas. One of the earliest conceptualizations by Cobb, Ross and Ross (1976) distinguishes between two trajectories. In the outside-initiation model issues first arrive on the public agenda and are expanded until so much pressure has been built up that governments are finally forced to seriously consider them for decision-making. In the mobilization model the agenda-setting sequence is the reverse. Here governments decide to tackle a problem and try to create public awareness and make citizens receptive to these ideas in order to make policies succeed.

In this study we modify this basic model in one important respect, by introducing the supermarket agenda as an important additional venue that needs to be included to better model and capture attention to sustainable meat and fish.

Bringing in the supermarket

While agenda-setting models have originally been developed to explain agenda-setting patterns with respect to governmental policies, this study expands its application to

supermarkets as an important and powerful category of non-state actors. Given the pivotal position of supermarkets in the food chain (around 75 % of food is bought in supermarkets) and the concentration of this sector (the top 10 retailers command 75 % of the market share), the food retail sector is a crucial actor in determining the sustainability of food production (Timmer 2009). On the one hand, supermarkets dictate the way in which foods are produced, by demanding process standards from producers. At the same time they can steer consumer behavior by offering sustainable products and advocating them to consumers.

As a result, political pressure for food sustainability is increasingly directly targeted at supermarkets and becoming a complement as well as alternative to the conventional strategy of lobbying governments. Non-governmental organizations treat supermarkets more and more as policy-makers in their own right: they raise public awareness about certain practices, encourage consumers to boycott certain products and try to force supermarkets to change their policies.

Moreover, external pressure is only one possible source of change. Supermarkets may themselves decide to pro-actively adopt more sustainable food policies as part of their marketing strategies, without having been forced to do so by external parties. Such steps may be the result of longer term sustainability goals but can also derive from strategic marketing decisions.

The combined result of both developments very often consists of the adoption of sectorwide sustainability practices that go beyond those mandated by formal legislation. Take for example the self-imposed ban of many Dutch supermarkets to not sell eel anymore as well as pledges to switch to selling MSC-labelled fish in the coming years. All in all this means that supermarkets in theory could emerge as important policy-makers in their own right and need to be studied in tandem with a more conventional analysis of governmental policies in the field of food sustainability. In this way *private interest regulation* by supermarkets (Marsden, Flynn and Harrison 1997) emerges as a possible alternative to *public interest regulation* by governments.

Paying attention to these alternative forms of regulation is becoming more and more relevant in the light of the alleged shift from government to governance which has taken place in the last decades. One aspect of this shift is the alleged decline in authority-making capacities of national states as a result of their integration into supranational and international regulatory frameworks. When it comes to regulating the sustainability of food, national governments are in many instances simply not allowed to introduce mandatory regulations because this for example constitutes a barrier to the free movement of goods within the EU.

Hence, even if all citizens of an EU member state would want a ban on the sale of non-organic eggs, governments could not put formal legislation in place to ensure this. Supermarkets however are theoretically in a position to impose such a ban, without running the risk of being challenged in the European Court of Justice for violating single market provisions.

The research project

The papers in this book collect the results of a research project within the framework of the course Public Policy at Roosevelt Academy. With sixteen students participating in a 15 week term we decided to investigate agenda-setting in a two staged process. First, we mapped attention to sustainability regarding meat and fish on the four agendas in four countries: the Netherlands, UK, Germany and Spain. The choice of these four countries was based on available language skills and the desire to at the same time look for some presumed variety in the attention to sustainability. The UK is generally seen as a front-runner, whilst Spain is regarded as a laggard. The Netherlands and Germany were included as two additional countries meriting investigation. Germany is known for its critical approach to GMOs. The Netherlands is interesting because of many recent developments that we outlined in the introduction: on the one hand it is home to the worlds first Animal Party, on the other hand the food and agricultural sector is not among the most advanced regarding sustainability. Because they are all members of the European Union they operate in the same regulatory framework regarding the issues to be studied. It also means general information on policies, public opinion and practices was readily available via sources such as Eurobarometer surveys.

Students mapped attention to these issues on four agendas using a conceptual scheme that distinguishes between three types of sustainability for meat and fish: animal welfare, human welfare and ecological welfare as is outlined in the box below.

Animal welfare concerns living conditions and housing conditions of different livestock, transportation conditions, feeding practices, types of feed used, methods of catching, slaughtering practices, use of medicines to advance growth etc.

Human welfare concerns may relate to the direct impact upon employees in the livestock sector or fisheries sector (work conditions, payments) as well as on the indirect impact consumption patterns may have through affecting the availability of meat and fish (equity, food security)

Ecological welfare relates to the environmental impact of production patterns such as the greenhouse gas emissions due to livestock farming, pollution of air and soil by intensive farming practices, soil erosion/deforestation as a result of feeding (cultivating soil in Brazil) or culturing practices (shrimp farming), overfishing or overhunting etc.

Box 1.1 Types of welfare and their operationalizations

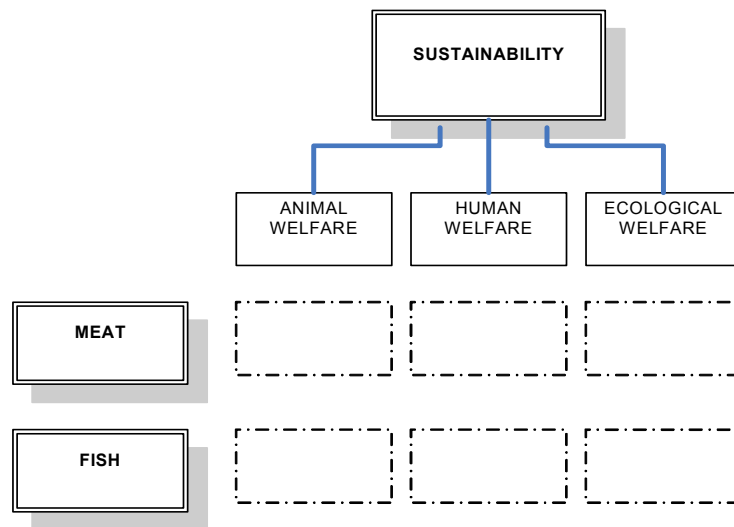


Figure 1: Conceptual scheme of mapping exercise

Employing this 4 x 4 design each student mapped attention to these different types of sustainability on one of four agendas in one of the four countries. For the *media agenda* attention was measured by searching and counting newspaper articles using the Lexis-Nexis database and keywords that tap the different categories above. For the *public agenda* we looked at concern among ordinary citizens (through public opinion surveys such as Eurobarometer) and at the activities of major interest groups (Greenpeace, WWF, etc.) in the three issue domains - using their websites as a major source of information. Students of the *supermarket agenda* first made an inventory of the policy pronouncements and policies by surveying websites and annual reports of the major supermarkets in every country. Finally, those students looking at the *governmental agenda* examined governmental efforts and actions to through searching for white papers, policy briefings, speeches, media campaigns, subsidization schemes as well as ex-ante policy evaluations.

The reports of this first phase give a bird's eye view of attention to sustainability in these four countries. The reports also provided ideas and inspiration for the second phase of the project: comparative and case studies which are reported in this book. Below we give an overview of these chapters.

This book

The first four studies in this book are comparative in nature and seek to examine a single agenda across two or more countries. The second batch of studies focus on one country and examine the dynamics between different agendas within that context. While agendas and agenda-setting appear in each of the chapters of this volume, important additional theoretical perspectives were drawn from Deborah Stone's *Policy Paradox*. Stone's book offers invaluable insights into better understanding political decision-making by making clear that the rules and conventions of the polis are so much more different and ambiguous than those of the market.

In Chapter 2 Ann Krüger and Marloes Loppen unpack the organizational structure of two international NGOs - Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund – and show to what extent these organizations have a localized approach to tackling these issues. It turns out that there is indeed considerable leeway for the national branches of these organizations to focus on specific themes and as such adjust their communication and lobbying activities to the national context.

Ginger de Ridder and Evi Limpens examine the media attention for the overfishing of bluefin tuna in Chapter 3 by employing Stone's concept of causal stories. They show that in each of the four countries most of the newspaper reports identify overfishing as an inadvertent cause. They moreover show that the fishery industry is most often identified as the culprit. However, in different countries different groups of fishers are being blamed. While UK and Dutch newspapers point to fishers in the Mediterranean, the Spanish media is inclined to blame French and Portuguese fishers.

In Chapter 4 Bente Meijer and Willemijn van den Toren scrutinize the sustainability practices of the two largest supermarket chains in the UK and the Netherlands. Their analysis confirms that UK supermarkets are doing more than the Dutch ones, because those in the UK tend to be more comprehensive. While Dutch supermarkets seek to merely provide a sustainable option to their consumers, UK supermarkets are more active in adopting sustainable codes of conduct which are mandatory for every supplier.

As a final comparative analysis in the book chapter 5 examines the welfare of farmed fish (aquaculture). Vincent Lauenstein and Frank Olie first show that there a surprising lack of attention to this in all countries and on all four agendas. In the terms of political scientist John Kingdon, fish welfare is only a condition, and not yet a problem, a status it need to obtain to arrive at the governmental agenda. Although at some points in time it seemed like

the issue would succeed in getting a solid status as a problem, they show that it repeatedly slipped of the agenda. One explanation for the lack of attention is that people are still not emotionally as connected to fish as they are to many of the animals that are used to produce meat.

The remaining four chapters of the book each examine different agendas and their dynamics in each of the four countries under study. First in chapter 6 Zeynep Sentek and Julia Khazanova compare the attention of UK supermarkets versus the UK government for animal welfare. Employing Albert Hirschman's logic of exit, voice and loyalty, they show that supermarkets in their competitive environment will have to be much more responsive to consumer preferences than the UK government is to its citizens. While supermarkets repeatedly justify their measures in terms of consumer demands, the UK government only rarely refers to the preferences of its citizens and rather justifies new policies on animal welfare by referring to scientific evidence.

Nessa Ikani and Djeyhoun Ostowar examine the meat tax as a possible solution to the problem of greenhouse gases by mapping the debate in the Netherlands. Their analysis in chapter 7 shows that this solution has been floating around for quite some time now, but still has not succeeded in getting a secure place on the governmental agenda. By now, several opposition parties have included some kind of proposal in their party program. A strategic reframing of the goals of the meat tax in the wake of for example the need for fiscal austerity would be needed to broaden support and also have the major political parties adopt such a proposal.

In chapter 8 Tijmen Gengler and Niels Rijke outline the German debate on a voluntary label indicating the use of non-genetically modified feed in food products. They show how the proposal for such a label arose on the public agenda but initially met resistance from supermarkets. With the supermarket venue blocked, pressure was subsequently put on the German government which in the end made arrangements to put such a label in place.

The final case study of the book is devoted to an examination of the debate on overfishing in Spain. Given the importance of the fishing industry for Spain's economy, Ana Kittl and Richard Nievaart examine the nature of the debate on the four different agendas. They show that economic considerations are indeed dominant on all four agendas, whilst environmental and ecological considerations are of minor importance and mostly brought up by a small group of NGOs.

Conclusions

What conclusions can we draw on the basis of the above studies? The first and most important one is that sustainable meat and fish is far from a regular item on the menu of the governments in the four countries. While we witness significant attention and concern in the media and among NGOs, the public, supermarkets and governments are only slowly recognizing these. The quote from the Dutch Minister of Agriculture at the start of this chapter is a typical example of this. It was her response to the manifest to improve livestock farming in the Netherlands. And although the manifest is well documented and referenced, she nevertheless accused the initiators of not doing their homework properly and presenting incorrect figures.

Secondly, we see clear differences between the four countries under study. The UK is leading and Spain is clearly lagging, with the Netherlands and Germany having a position in between these two countries. The studies in this book show that this is the result of different national agenda setting dynamics. The UK for example has a well developed NGO sector that monitors and pushes supermarkets into more sustainable behaviour, something that is facilitated by a population that has been concerned about animal welfare for a long time. Germany for its part turns out to be very concerned about everything having to do with GMOs. Awareness in Spain is virtually absent. Supermarkets are silent on sustainability, the public does not seem to care, and the government is much more concerned with the economy than with the environment – which should not be that surprising in a country with an unemployment rate of 20 %.

Thirdly, and finally, we should at this point not consider supermarkets to be the proactive policy-makers that they could in theory be. By and large supermarket behaviour is reactive and determined by the extent to which they are pressured by the public, NGOs and the governments as well as by strategic considerations regarding market positioning. In all countries being sustainable is in fact a niche market. Instead of the big retailers becoming sustainable, we witness the emergence of small organic-only start-ups, that cater to the highly affluent, urbanized, well-educated segment of consumers, but not the mainstream.

So what would be needed to give sustainable meat and fish a firmer position on the menu? First, consumers should be willing to pay more for their meat and fish and as a result would have to learn to eat less animal protein. Not every day and in far smaller quantities, maybe even as a side dish, as Thomas Jefferson used to recommend. Supermarkets face the challenges of a competitive environment where for a long time price and not quality has been the dominant consideration. Moving toward sectorwide sustainable practices requires a concerted effort in which each of them is willing to set certain minimum standards. As long

as this is not succeeding, we are dependent upon market leaders that can afford to offer the sustainable option as part of a strategic positioning relative to other supermarkets. National governments finally are not only faced with resistance from powerful national lobbies but also with a regulatory environment in which it is in fact very difficult to put formal legislation in place that affects the single market. The only option to seriously incorporate sustainability requirements in binding legislation is at the level of the European Union. However, it is exactly at that level that the interests of food producers and retailers are even better than at the national level organized than those of consumers and the environment. And even if they would succeed in proposing such measures, it might be very well possible that such measures will be challenged before the tribunal of the World Trade Organization, by countries such as China, the U.S.A, or Brazil.

All in all then studying the agenda-setting dynamics for the sustainable production and consumption of meat and fish, turned out to be the right exercise at the right moment. Things are definitely in flux, but the issues are very far from having secured a solid status on the governmental agenda. There is no doubt that the struggle for agenda-status will go on for quite a few years. Hence it would be a very good idea to regularly monitor the result of this struggle, something that can be easily done by a new batch of students who want to increase their insight in the dynamics of public policy through examining what is on their daily plate.

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