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Short communication

Towards integrated food policy: Main challenges and steps ahead

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ABSTRACT

Repeated food crises have resulted in increased recognition of the boundary-spanning nature of governing food systems and in consequent calls for more holistic food governance. An increasing number of governments have followed up on this recognition by initiating or discussing the development of better integrated food policy. However, in spite of the emergence of integrated food policy as a policy paradigm worth pursuing, considerable challenges remain regarding its concrete realization. Drawing upon recent insights from the public policy literature, this policy letter sets out five particularly demanding areas of concern: (i) constructing a resonating policy frame, (ii) formulating policy goals, (iii) involving relevant sectors and levels, (iv) the question of what constitutes optimal policy integration, and (v) designing a consistent mix of policy instruments. Formulating answers to these challenges will enable policymakers and stakeholders to envision the next steps in concretizing integrated food policy.

1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a rapid emergence of calls for a transition towards (more) sustainable food systems amongst governing bodies (e.g., European Commission, 2015; UNEP, 2015) and scholars alike (e.g., Friedmann, 2007; iPES Food, 2015; Lang and Barling, 2012; Marsden and Morley, 2014). Food price volatility, persisting food insecurity, repeated food safety crises, spreading obesity, and negative impacts on climate change and environmental degradation have led to increasing consensus that current modes and levels of food production and consumption are pressing the boundaries of social-ecological systems (Ingram et al., 2012; Lang and Heasman, 2015; Tilman et al., 2002). Whereas food-related societal problems have traditionally predominantly been interpreted and dealt with through an agricultural perspective, these crises revealed the inherent systemic complexity of such problems, thereby uncovering the role of factors related to value chains, consumption, public health, and the environment, inter alia (Erickson, 2008; Fresco, 2009; Pereira and Ruysenaar, 2012). From a governance perspective, the crises have made clear that food system outcomes are affected by a complex range of determinants and that traditional governmental efforts to steer these determinants through monocentric command and control strategies get stranded in ‘siloe’d’ administrative systems, intractable controversies between opposing value systems, and power struggles between constellations of interests (Candel, 2016; Lang and Heasman, 2015; Margulis, 2013).

In response to these governance failures, policymakers have in-

creasingly recognized food as a policy field that transcends the boundaries of existing jurisdictions and for that reason requires integrated policy approaches and boundary-spanning governance arrangements (Barling et al., 2002; Lang and Ingram, 2013; MacRae, 2011). ‘Food policy’ has hereby become a popular and widely resonating discursive device. Whereas in the past, food policy was primarily used to indicate the whole range of policy efforts that affect food system outcomes, the notion has more and more come to be used to emphasize the need for integrative strategies that align these policy efforts into a concerted whole. Such concerted efforts would entail pursuing a shared vision of future food systems through coherent sectoral policy goals and a supportive and consistent mix of policy instruments (cf. Rayner and Howlett, 2009).

The Netherlands is a good example of a country in which calls for better integrated food policy have made their way onto political agendas in recent years. Following on the publication of a report by the Scientific Council for Government Policy entitled ‘Towards a food policy’ in 2014 (WRR, 2014; English synopsis available), the Dutch government developed a national ‘food agenda’ that seeks to reconcile the food system with public health, ecological sustainability, and robustness (Ministry of Economic Affairs, 2015). Concretizing this agenda is still very much work-in-progress and it remains to be seen whether the strategy proceeds beyond paper realities. At the same time, it encompasses a plea for food policy integration that has had few precedents. Similar initiatives have been undertaken at provincial and municipality levels. For example, various Dutch cities, including

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Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, and Ede, have developed local food strategies or in the case of Ede have even assigned food to an alderman's portfolio.

These initiatives are not unique to the Netherlands; similar developments can be observed in other polities. At the European Union level, there is a public debate about whether the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) should be transformed into a Common Food Policy (cf. [EESC, 2016](#); [Fresco and Poppe, 2016](#); [iPES Food, 2016](#); [Marsden, 2015](#)). Various European national governments, including those of France, Scotland, Sweden, Ireland, Finland, and Germany have developed or are discussing the development of national food strategies. Norway particularly stands out, as it has had a relatively well-integrated Nutrition and Food Policy since the 1970s ([Klepp and Forster, 1985](#)). The United Kingdom launched its integrated Food 2030 strategy in 2010 ([Marsden, 2010](#)), which due to a change of government was hardly implemented. Across the Atlantic, Canada's Trudeau government has designated the development of an integrative food policy as a priority. The United States' farm bill has always covered wider issues, such as food stamps, nutrition, and marketing, but, here too, debates about a national food policy have sprouted. In the Global South, many governments, have developed integrated food and nutrition security strategies, of which those of Brazil and South Africa are notable examples ([Drimie and Ruysenaar, 2010](#); [Pereira and Drimie, 2016](#); [Rocha, 2009](#)).

In spite of these calls and developments, the shift towards truly integrated and substantive food policy is still far from completion (cf. [Candel, 2016](#)). This is not surprising, as achieving policy integration is one of the philosopher's stones of public policymaking ([Peters, 2015](#)). In this policy letter, I set out five challenges, or open questions, that are particularly pressing in the context of recent attempts at food policy integration. These challenges are informed by recent debates on policy integration and coordination in the public policy literature (e.g., [Candel and Biesbroek, 2016](#); [Jochim and May, 2010](#); [Peters, 2015](#); [Rayner and Howlett, 2009](#)). Formulating answers to these questions will enable policymakers and stakeholders to envision the next steps ahead and to lay down policy directions in the near future.

2. Five food policy integration challenges

2.1. Constructing a resonating policy frame

A first policy integration challenge is the realization of an overarching policy frame that finds wide resonance within a polity and can foster integrative action ([Peters, 2005](#)). The presence of a coherent and convincing set of ideas to which relevant sectors and levels of government can relate is a precondition to establishing a common approach and motivation ([Jochim and May, 2010](#); [Peters, 2015](#)). It is hereby particularly important that such a frame contributes to a shared understanding of the crosscutting nature of the food system and consequent need for a holistic policy framework (cf. [Candel and Biesbroek, 2016](#)).

As indicated in the introduction, 'food policy' is itself developing towards becoming such an integrative policy frame, potentially connecting a range of policy efforts under the header of realizing a transition towards a sustainable food system. At the same time, food policy is still far from an agreed-on concept in everyday policy debates and has been subject to conflicting interpretations ([Peters and Pierre, 2014](#)). 'Sustainable food security' is another discursive device that finds wide resonance and may serve to mobilize relevant policy actors behind a common approach. However, for this notion too, there is considerable 'dissensus' about policy directions behind the broad commitment to food security as a goal ([Candel et al., 2014](#); [Mooney and Hunt, 2009](#)).

These reservations show that the challenge of constructing a resonating food policy frame is not to be underestimated. Changing existing ideas and preferences takes time ([Hall, 1993](#)), and depends on broad and sustained public support. In this respect, the question of

whether macropolitical decision-makers are willing to continue committing political resources to food policy initiatives will be of crucial importance. Sustained political action will be more likely if *policy goals* can be linked to existing concerns of decision-makers and their constituencies.

2.2. Formulating policy goals

Although a transition towards more sustainable food systems constitutes an overarching goal in itself, it is a rather broad and ambiguous one, and therefore requires a further specification of what policy goals should be central to a polity's integrated food policy efforts. Hereby, first of all, policymakers will have to take the specific food system challenges and complexities into account, which will differ across place and time ([Drimie and Ruysenaar, 2010](#)). Second, however, depending on their backgrounds and associated interests, policy actors will have different perceptions about what challenges are most pressing. Formulating food policy goals thus implies making political choices, thereby being explicit about priorities and possible trade-offs. The latter is particularly important in light of the desirability of a certain degree of coherence of policy goals (cf. [Rayner and Howlett, 2009](#)), even though how to assess such coherence remains open to debate ([Candel and Biesbroek, 2016](#)). Moreover, to achieve coherence it is essential that the formulation and adoption of food policy goals is not restricted to a possible overarching food strategy but also to the policy efforts across sectors and levels. Adjusting these subsystem goals to make them fit within a comprehensive food policy package will, again, require considerable political backing, as it requires a change of existing priorities and preferences. In addition, it will necessitate cross-sectoral buy-in and multi-level cooperation.

2.3. Involving relevant sectors and levels

Given that food policy is a multi-sector and -level challenge ([Barling et al., 2002](#)), two questions are of particular importance: (i) which sectors and levels should be involved?; and (ii) how to organize coordination between them? Regarding the first, the crises mentioned in the introduction showed that food systems are affected by virtually the whole range of governmental policy. Ideally, food system concerns would therefore be 'mainstreamed' in all relevant sectors. In practice, it is more feasible and opportune to set priorities (cf. [Jordan and Halpin, 2006](#)), e.g., by focusing on those sectors in which the most obvious externalities or failures occur (see point 4). However, just as these failures are largely constructed within social interactions ([Zittoun, 2015](#)), the question of which sectors are most relevant is subject to political contestation. In terms of levels of government, *parallel* debates about integrated food policy across levels have given rise to the question of which roles each of these levels can and should play as well as how these roles relate to each other.

The last point leads to the question of coordination under this challenge. Even if relevant sectors and levels are committed to food policy integration, which is far from given, there are many possible impediments to effective coordination. It goes beyond the scope of this policy letter to mention all constraining factors and mechanisms that the literature has identified ([Peters, 2015](#); [Vince, 2015](#)), but limited capacities, competing priorities, or even turf wars between governmental bodies are all realistic phenomena in the context of food policy integration (see, for example, [Drimie and Ruysenaar, 2010](#)). A valuable insight that the policy integration literature has arrived at is that coordinative structures and procedures, such as inter-departmental committees or impact assessments, are important but insufficient ways of overcoming these challenges; they will only effectuate a genuine change of governance when combined with a resonating policy frame and sustained political leadership ([Peters, 2015](#)). South Africa has, for example, aimed to safeguard political prioritization by allocating the responsibility for its Food and Nutrition Security policy to the pre-

sidential office (Pereira and Drimie, 2016). Having goals recognised as a strategic overarching objective can help enabling action across sectors and levels.

2.4. What constitutes optimal policy integration?

A third challenge concerns the question of what constitutes optimal food policy integration. This question follows from the intrinsic tension between policy integration and specialization. Whereas policy integration is often prescribed as a remedy for problems originating from the fragmentation of policy efforts across subunits, such fragmentation serves the important function of allowing for specialization within polities, which is indispensable given the vast range of complex problems that governments and international organizations have to deal with (Schön, 1993). Consequently, governance scholars have argued that rather than integrating fragmented subunits into a new hierarchic whole, a ‘polycentric’ governance model may be more appropriate, meaning that specialized subunits are maintained but that increased effort is put in organizing connectivity between them (e.g., Lankford and Hepworth, 2010; Ostrom, 2010; Termeer et al., 2011). Polycentric governance thus proposes a model of policy integration that, somewhat paradoxically, harnesses fragmentation.

The Netherlands provides a good example of a public debate about the question of how to organize integrated food policy and associated tensions between policy concentration and specialization. In Spring 2016, there was quite some media attention to the concrete suggestions made by various food policy scholars and politicians (e.g., Lanjouw, 2016; Lelieveldt, 2016; NOS, 2016). In broad lines, the debate focused on whether Dutch food policy would best be served by creating an overarching ministry for food (i.e. a new hierarchic whole) or, instead, by having a minister without portfolio being responsible for aligning policy efforts across individual ministries (i.e. a more polycentric model). A similar debate has been waged about the question of whether the EU Common Agricultural Policy should transform into a Common Food Policy, or that such a food policy could better be developed parallel to the CAP (Candel, 2016; EESC, 2016). Given food’s cross-scale nature and overlap with other ‘wicked’ policy problems as well as the arguments outlined in the abovementioned governance literature, the polycentric models may be considered most appropriate. This line of reasoning was, for example, followed in the South African government’s decision to make the presidential office responsible for coordinating relevant sectors and levels (Pereira and Drimie, 2016).

2.5. Designing a consistent mix of policy instruments

Lastly, to develop integrated food policy that proceeds beyond symbolic or discursive levels, it is key to develop a mix of policy instruments that helps pursuing the formulated goals. However, decisions about instruments are at least as contentious as those about goals (Howlett and Ramesh, 2003). This is particularly true for the context of food policy, in which instruments are easily reproached for being either market-distorting and paternalist or, on the contrary, lacking substance and ambition (cf. Lang and Heasman, 2015). In most countries, the former types of critiques have been most dominant, resulting in the relatively limited presence of ‘hard’ policy instruments that draw upon authority or financial incentives such as taxation. Instead, the last decades of neoliberalism and, more recently, ‘big society’, have been characterized by a prevalence of relatively ‘soft’ instruments, such as public information campaigns and voluntary agreements with private enterprises. If food policy proponents are genuine in their calls for a transition towards strengthened sustainability, a more balanced instrument mix may be required (cf. Gunningham and Sinclair, 1999; Lelieveldt, 2016).

Apart from the types of instruments, it is important that the instrument mix is consistent, meaning that instruments enforce rather than contradict each other (Howlett and Rayner, 2007). As with

coherence, such inconsistencies are difficult to objectivize (Candel and Biesbroek, 2016). At the same time, policymakers in polities with an elaborate system of impact assessments and comparable instruments often have a relatively good sense of where the biggest inconsistencies occur.

An important consideration when designing or adjusting food policy instruments is how governmental efforts are thought to relate to those of the private sector. The (effects of) efforts of civil society, businesses, and other actors will need to be taken into account when diagnosing the consistency of the instrument mix as a whole as well as when deciding about the desirability of deploying particular hard or soft instruments. The latter can be used to steer or facilitate favourably perceived efforts under the ‘shadow of hierarchy’ (cf. Scharpf, 1994), which, as argued above, would imply following up with hard instruments when private actors do not deliver on their promises or when estimated effects do not come off.

3. Conclusion

By developing a political vision along the above five challenges, decision-makers may succeed in developing truly integrated food policy. Being clear about goals, instruments, sectors, and levels, while embedding these within a resonating policy frame and governance vision will certainly help overcoming many of the doubts and question marks surrounding recent food policy initiatives and debates. At the same time, it should be stressed that the quest for policy integration has not been labelled as the philosopher’s stone of public policy without a reason; achieving successful policy integration is very difficult. Indeed, food policy has been characterized as a ‘wicked’ policy problem, implying that the many dimensions and frames involved produce different conceptions and priorities amongst actors (Candel, 2016; Peters and Pierre, 2014). The broader food governance networks in which public decision-makers have to navigate do not make this task lighter.

Policymakers aiming for enhanced coordination have often sought to deal with the challenge of aligning such different perspectives through developing boundary-spanning structures and procedures. Throughout this policy letter it has repeatedly been stressed that such structures and procedures are important, but insufficient on themselves. Instead, successful (food) policy integration will depend on combining such measures with a resonating set of ideas and, maybe most importantly, sustained political leadership. In particular, furthering food policy will involve making some fundamental political choices about whether and how a transition towards more sustainable food systems should be pursued (Lang and Heasman, 2015). The recent politicization of food can be considered a positive development in this respect, but in many countries politicians have not yet come up to the mark in presenting and actively sponsoring a coherent vision (Lelieveldt, 2016). Only when politicians assume such leadership, genuine integrated food policy may become a reality.

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