



“We don’t tell people what to do”: An examination of the factors influencing NGO decisions to campaign for reduced meat consumption in light of climate change



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ABSTRACT

To date, efforts by non-governmental organizations to encourage reduced meat consumption in light of climate change have been quite limited, particularly among environmental non-governmental organizations. This study sought to examine the factors influencing non-governmental organization decisions to establish and sustain dedicated public education and/or policy advocacy campaigns on this issue. More specifically, a grounded theory approach was used to examine environmental, food-focused, and animal protection non-governmental organizations in the U.S., Sweden, and Canada. Results indicate that the relatively limited degree of engagement is primarily attributable to the fact that few non-governmental organization staffers felt that addressing meat consumption within a climate change context was a part of their core missions. Reduced meat consumption was also seen as an issue with limited social and political appeal. Further, many environmental non-governmental organizations appeared to be reluctant to mount campaigns explicitly encouraging personal behavior change of any type. Cross- non-governmental organization collaboration or the creation of additional non-governmental organizations with missions focused on this specific issue may be needed to increase the level of campaigning on this issue.

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1. Introduction

Diets high in animal products, particularly red meat, have been found to be high in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions relative to more plant-based diets (Carlsson-Kanyama and González, 2009; Stehfest et al., 2009; González et al., 2011). Accordingly, reducing meat consumption represents a valuable climate change mitigation strategy (Berners-Lee et al., 2012; Westhoek et al., 2014). Recent research suggests that reducing “ruminant meat and dairy consumption will be indispensable” for preventing global average surface temperatures from rising by more than 2 °C above pre-industrial levels (Hedenus et al., 2014). Further, a move away from meat-intensive diets in the West would reduce chronic disease rates (Scarborough et al., 2012). Despite these benefits, there has

been seemingly little action by national governments to bring about meaningful reductions in meat consumption (Bristow and Fitzgerald, 2011; Dagevos and Voordouw, 2013).

In the absence of government action, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can play important roles, both raising awareness of the need for dietary change and advocating for policy reforms on this issue. To date, however, many NGOs also appear to be hesitant to develop either dedicated public education or policy advocacy campaigns aimed at reducing meat consumption in light of climate change (Laestadius et al., 2013). With a few notable exceptions, environmental NGOs in particular have encouraged only small changes to meat consumption and have only promoted those changes in minor ways rather than establishing dedicated campaigns on the issue (Laestadius et al., 2013; Freeman, 2010; Bristow and Fitzgerald, 2011).

Given continued high rates of meat consumption in Western nations, as well as the importance of individual behavior change to climate change mitigation more generally (Semenza et al., 2008), it is important to understand why NGOs have not undertaken more

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work to reduce meat consumption. The aim of this study is to understand the factors that influence NGO decisions to adopt and sustain some form of dedicated campaign (either policy advocacy or public education focused) aimed at reducing domestic meat consumption in light of the evidence about climate change and livestock production. More specifically, this manuscript presents findings derived from data collected through interviews with NGO staff members from environmental, animal protection, and food-focused NGOs in the United States, Sweden, and Canada.

2. Prior topical and theoretical research

While many NGOs currently have language encouraging decreased meat consumption on their websites, it is primarily animal protection and food-focused NGOs, rather than those with an environmental focus, that have adopted more active public education campaigns on this issue in the aforementioned nations (Laestadius et al., 2013). Further, the language used by most non-animal protection groups generally requests only small reductions in meat consumption (Laestadius et al., 2013). Efforts promoting smaller reductions in meat consumption now commonly fall into two categories: (1) meatless days (such as “Meatless Mondays” in the U.S. or “Donderdag Veggiedag” in Belgium), or (2) reducing meat portions in favor of a “less but better” approach to meat consumption (de Boer et al., 2014). The motivations that lead many NGOs to prefer these strategies include a desire to keep messages appealing to what they view as the average consumer (Laestadius et al., 2014). It should, however, be stressed that many NGOs have language on their websites promoting these messages, but do not have an active campaign to promote meat reduction (Laestadius et al., 2013). Among more active NGOs, efforts have generally taken the form of dedicated websites, advertising campaigns, and at times also included the distribution of educational materials at public events (Laestadius et al., 2013). An even smaller number of NGOs are currently advocating for national level policy efforts specifically aimed at reducing meat consumption in light of climate change (Laestadius et al., 2013). With few exceptions, it is clear that despite the evidence linking meat consumption to climate change, substantial efforts to reduce meat consumption in the United States, Sweden, and Canada have remained the domain of a handful of animal protection and food-focused NGOs.

2.1. Barriers to campaigns on meat consumption and climate change

It has been speculated that the contentious nature of dictating dietary choices and a fear of alienating NGO supporters have hampered efforts so far (Bristow and Fitzgerald, 2011; Neff et al., 2009; Lappé, 2010). As suggested by Doyle (2011, p. 143), any campaign that seeks reduced meat consumption is at risk of “being accused of preaching, by questioning a person’s ‘individual right’ to consume what they like.” This is further reinforced by the cultural significance of meat consumption in the West (Allen and Baines, 2002; Kheel, 2004; Doyle, 2011). Prior research has also suggested that efforts to regulate food choices may be seen by the public as overly paternalistic (Creighton, 2009). With regard to policy approaches, Nordgren (2012) wrote that a European Union tax on meat products would be opposed by many due to “commitments to the livestock industry and out of respect for individual autonomy and privacy” (p. 112).

Reluctance to address meat consumption might also be due to a hesitancy to address individual behavior change more generally. Western governments, for example, have appeared reluctant to regulate individual behaviors related to environmental issues for fear of a public backlash (Robins and Roberts, 2006; Lorenzoni et al., 2007; Ockwell et al., 2009). While generally seen as less paternalistic than policy efforts (Maibach and Holtgrave, 1995),

even consumer driven approaches to behavior change may be seen as contentious. Kass (2001), for example, suggests that all public health education campaigns are potentially paternalistic. Assuming this view is shared by NGOs, there may be a concern that public education campaigns would be perceived as intrusive.

There is also some concern that targeting consumer behavior and personal choice may simply serve to reinforce the status quo by “broadly sustaining existing standards and conventions but doing so more efficiently” (Shove, 2010, p. 1277). Accordingly, there have been arguments for addressing “practices” rather than behaviors. Spurling et al. (2013, p. 8) suggest that meat consumption is much more than just a choice and highlight the fact that people hold a “a shared understanding, or cultural convention, that a ‘proper meal’ contains meat, vegetables and carbohydrates.” Interventions to reduce meat consumption would also need to go beyond personal choice to address practice, which includes a focus on “routine, convention, and the everyday constraints of resources, infrastructures and institutions” (Spurling et al., 2013, p. 8). Unfortunately, this is often seen as more politically contentious than a focus on consumer choices (Shove, 2010). Thus, NGOs may face barriers to addressing meat consumption as either a choice or a practice.

Additionally, because carbon dioxide is generally characterized as the primary GHG of concern, NGOs may have a bias toward addressing emissions from energy sources rather than agricultural sector emissions, which are primarily comprised of methane and nitrous oxide (Neff et al., 2009; Lappé, 2010). It has also been suggested that the relatively recent nature of the scientific evidence on meat consumption and climate change, as compared to that on emissions from other sectors, has limited engagement so far (Neff et al., 2009). That said, nearly a decade has passed since the 2006 publication of the seminal United Nations’ report *Livestock’s Long Shadow*, which brought significant public attention to emissions from the livestock sector (Steinfeld et al., 2006).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the challenges of campaigning on climate change more generally. Unlike many other environmental issues, climate change is characterized by the fact that it is not visible and its impacts are distant (Moser, 2010). As a result, active concern about climate change is often trumped by “immediately felt physical needs, professional demands, economic necessities, or social obligations” (Moser, 2010, p. 34). Additionally, recognition of climate change remains a polarizing issue, particularly in the United States (Wike, 2014). Even in Europe and Canada, however, only 54% of those surveyed by the Pew Research Center in 2013 cited global climate change as a major threat (Wike, 2014). It is clear then that NGOs must tackle two distinct contentious issues when they seek to address meat consumption and climate change.

While Laestadius et al. (2014) examines the factors shaping NGO decisions about the *content* of meat consumption and climate change messages, prior studies on this issue have not engaged directly with NGO staff members to formally examine the factors influencing the decision whether or not to *create and sustain* a dedicated campaign focused on reducing meat consumption in light of climate change. Rather, understanding of why NGOs have not adopted dedicated campaigns on this issue has relied largely on conjecture. Our study addresses this important gap in the literature.

2.2. Theoretical underpinnings of NGO decisions

In addition to the factors mentioned above, the literature on social movement organizations suggests that the strategic decisions of an NGO are shaped by factors including the NGO’s resources and funders; the identity, ideology, and values of the NGO; and the political landscape of the issue it seeks to address

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