



Disentangling the consensus frame of food security: The case of the EU Common Agricultural Policy reform debate



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ABSTRACT

This article addresses which food security frames can be identified in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) post-2013 reform process, and which actors deploy particular food security frames. The concept of frames refers to relatively distinct and coherent sets of meaning attributed to a concept, such as food security. The article shows that in the European Union (EU) food security is a consensus frame which can be broken down in six conflicting and overlapping sub-frames and which has complicated the debates about the future of the CAP. We demonstrate that during the CAP-reform debates of 2009–2012 a variety of food security arguments were deployed by a broad range of stakeholders, who attached different meanings and made different claims about the relationship between the CAP and food security. Inductive frame analysis reveals that the consensus frame of food security can be broken down into six conflicting and overlapping sub-frames: (1) the productionist frame, (2) the environmental frame, (3) the development frame, (4) the free trade frame, (5) the regional frame, and (6) the food sovereignty frame. Each of these frames was invoked by a specific group of stakeholders, whereby the productionist and environmental frames were deployed most often. The European Commission, meanwhile, invoked various frames at the same time in its communications. As a result of these various framings of the relationship between the CAP and food security, a clear political vision on this relationship is lacking. We conclude that politicians and policymakers may need to develop a coherent vision on what food security entails, and on how the CAP could contribute to both European and global food security.

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Introduction

The attention paid to food security has risen considerably in European agricultural policymaking, but the content of food security policy remains ambiguous. Generally ignored for decades, food security regained a prominent position in the public debate about how the European Union (EU) should organize its main agricultural steering device, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The CAP is being reformed in the period from 2009 through 2013, and should become effective by 2014 (Grant, 2012a; Zahrnt, 2011).

The pervasiveness of food security in the European context is remarkable. Even though the CAP's initial objectives that were set out in the 1958 Treaty of Rome have never been formally revised in any of the following EU treaties, food security was only of minor importance in the various reforms since its creation. Additionally, although guaranteeing European food provision is often mentioned as one of the reasons for the introduction of the CAP in 1962, the EU currently produces much more food than it can

consume, and most of its citizens have never experienced any food shortage (Zahrnt, 2011). This is also reflected by most research on food security. Food security has received extensive attention in academic journals in recent years, but only a fraction of these studies has paid attention to the EU context (e.g., Brunori et al., 2013; Fish et al., 2012; Grant, 2012a; Kirwan and Maye, 2013; Tomlinson, 2013).

What makes the use of food security in the CAP post-2013 debate interesting is the ambiguity of the concept. Food security arguments have been raised by a broad range of stakeholders in the CAP reform debate (Zahrnt, 2011). The meanings that these stakeholders attach to food security, however, and the claims they make by invoking food security show big variations. Previous studies have argued that this “fractured consensus” (Maye and Kirwan, 2013) about the meaning of food security results from the different interests and policy positions of stakeholders using the concept (Lang and Barling, 2012; Mooney and Hunt, 2009). In this article, we analyze the extent of the variation in the use of food security arguments and which actors deploy these different meanings.

Building on the work of Mooney and Hunt (2009), we start from the assumption that food security functions as a consensus frame. A consensus frame is a concept or term that finds broad resonance and consent, but which is used to make diverging, and sometimes

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conflicting, claims. Or, in other words, a consensus frame may in practice be constituted by various slumbering frames lying behind the term. Frames, here, refer to relatively distinct and coherent sets of meaning attributed to a concept (cf. Dewulf et al., 2009; van Lieshout et al., 2012). Recognizing these frames is important, because the ideas they contain can have a considerable impact on processes of policy formation and institutionalization (e.g., Béland, 2009; Béland and Cox, 2011; Campbell, 2002; Feindt and Oels, 2005: 161–162; Grant, 2012b; Schmidt, 2008).

Consequently, we address two research questions here. The first is: *which food security frames¹ can be identified in the CAP post-2013 reform process?* The aim of this question is to validate whether the use of food security in the CAP debate is indeed subject to various frames about what food security entails and about how the CAP could most effectively contribute to food security. The second research question is: *which actors deploy food security frames?* Frames result from actors' discursive practices. The aim of this question is to identify the stakeholders who deploy specific frames.

To answer these two research questions, we performed an inductive frames analysis on both policy and consultation documents and on conferences to analyze the use of food security in the public debate about the CAP post-2013 reform.

The article proceeds with a theoretical section in which we briefly expound the literature on framing, and consensus frames in particular. In the third section, we describe our inductive frame analysis. In section four, we present the results of this analysis, by first describing the various frames identified, and then the stakeholders associated with these frames. Regarding the latter, we specifically consider the European Commission's frames. In the final section, we present our discussion and conclusions.

Framing and consensus frames

Framing

Framing has gained wide popularity in multiple academic disciplines over the last decades. This has led to confusion regarding the exact meaning of the concept and its key assumptions (Entman, 1993; Van den Brink, 2009). A common denominator, however, is that frames result from processes through which people make sense of particular issues and situations (Termeer and Werkman, 2011). Frames structure the way in which people perceive reality and communicate about it. Through these acts of communication, people add meaning to physical or social phenomena (Van den Brink, 2009).

The definition of framing used in this article originates from communication science. Framing implies “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/ or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993: 52). Following this definition, framing activities presuppose the presence of actors who are behaving strategically. On the basis of their particular position towards a policy issue, actors express both cognitive and normative ideas about the issue at hand. Through these ideas, actors attach meaning to a problem, lay causal relationships, and propose solutions, by “highlighting particular aspects of a perceived reality, while simultaneously occluding or downplaying other aspects” (Van den Brink, 2009: 35).

A focus on framing, thus, implies studying the processes through which people make sense of or interpret the “world out there”, and communicate about it. In this article, we merely focus

on the latter; we do not study the cognitive processes through which people make sense of particular phenomena, but limit ourselves to how people, intentionally or unintentionally, communicate about these phenomena. These forms of communication we refer to as frames: relatively distinct and coherent sets of meanings (cf. Dewulf et al., 2009; van Lieshout et al., 2012).

The reason why stakeholders engage in framing in policy formation processes is to portray a current policy issue in such a way that it supports the interests of a particular actor or a coalition of actors (cf. Meijerink, 2005). Sometimes, frames obtain wide support and enable the institutionalization of a particular ideational constellation. In the 1950s and 1960s, European agricultural policy was, for instance, framed mainly in terms of food security and a steady income for European farmers. This enabled the introduction of a CAP that was primarily focused on the special needs and interests of the agricultural sector (cf. Skogstad, 1998).

At other times, however, policy issues can be subject to various, potentially conflicting, frames at the same time. This is particularly true when multiple actors are involved. In such cases, framing can lead to counter-framing by other actors, who, based on different interests, attach different meanings to the issue at hand. These types of policy issues may be called “wicked problems”, which are “ill-defined [problems that...] rely upon elusive political judgment for resolution” (Rittel and Webber, 1973: 160). Food security is often classified as a wicked problem (c.f., Anthony, 2012; Hamann et al., 2011; MacMillan and Dowler, 2012; Termeer et al., 2013). A good example of framing and counter-framing in the context of food security is the invocation of food sovereignty. Both non-governmental organizations, such as *via Campesina* – representing small farmers – and academics (e.g., Fairbairn, 2012), use food sovereignty as an alternative for food security. According to them, food security is associated with neo-liberal and agri-industrial interests, whereas food sovereignty offers a more inclusive approach to issues of food provision, such as regional and cultural aspects of food production. Food sovereignty is thus a counter-frame to food security in the context of food provision debates (cf. Lang and Barling, 2012).

Consensus frames

Consensus frames are a specific type of frame. Sometimes, particular terms or concepts are widely shared and accepted in terms of their values and objectives. A typical example is sustainability: it is a concept that no one can be against and finds wide resonance, and therefore is used by a broad range of actors, even though many of them hold contradictory policy positions. Gamson (1995) calls such terms “consensus frames”.

However, as Gamson points out, behind this apparent consensus, dissensus, in the form of different frames and corresponding claims, may lie hidden. Although many actors use the concept of sustainability, what they mean by the term, their causal analyses, and which forms of action they champion differ strongly. The frames behind a single consensus frame can thus be used to construe a wicked problem in different ways.

Mooney and Hunt (2009) were the first to approach food security as a consensus frame. Since the publication of their study, several other articles have adopted this approach (Brunori et al., 2013; Hinrichs, 2012; Maye and Kirwan, 2013). Mooney and Hunt (2009) argued that, although food security finds wide resonance in general in the United States, meanings attached to the concept vary between discursive contexts. They identified three distinct frames (which they call framing, accentuating the discursive processes through which they are created) behind the food security consensus frame in the American context, namely, Hunger Framing, Community Framing, and Risk Framing. In the first frame, food security is primarily viewed as an issue of hunger. Community framing re-

¹ By food security frames, we mean frames regarding the relationship between the CAP and food security.

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