



Socio-cultural sustainability of pig production: Citizen perceptions in the Netherlands and Denmark

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ABSTRACT

Many sustainability studies of animal production consider three pillars: the economic, environmental and socio-cultural. Farmers and animal scientists tend to put most emphasis on the economic and environmental pillar and largely ignore the socio-cultural pillar. Socio-cultural sustainability refers to social perceptions of animal farming, including social appreciations and concerns of animal production systems. Integration of social demands and values in the production sector is a prerequisite to justify animal production within a society. The objective of the present study was therefore to gain further insights into socio-cultural sustainability of pig production. Many citizens may not know what contemporary pig production actually entails. To give people a real life experience with pig production, we conducted farm visits with citizen panels with 18 respondents in the Netherlands and 8 respondents in Denmark. In both countries, respondents were divided over two panels and each panel visited a conventional and an organic pig farm. During the farm visits respondents noted their sensory experiences – what do you smell, hear, see and feel? In addition, each respondent made pictures of six positive and six negative aspects on the farms for which they had to write a motivation. The qualitative analysis resulted in seven socio-cultural themes (SCT) of pig production namely: 1) meat production, 2) farm activities, 3) farm income, 4) animals, 5) housing system, 6) environment and nature, and 7) culture and landscape. Each SCT included several socio-cultural aspects (appreciations, SCA) and socio-cultural issues (concerns, SCI). We identified 31 SCAs in the Netherlands and 33 SCAs in Denmark, of which 29 were SCIs in both countries. Although many issues were associated with animal welfare, the results also showed that social concerns of pig production extended beyond animal welfare. In general it can be stated that citizens are strongly concerned about overexploitation of animals in contemporary pig production systems, but at the same time they appreciate the dynamism in a pig farm including certain modern developments.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Demand for sustainable animal production

After the Second World War, agricultural production systems in Western societies increased in terms of scale, intensity and specialisation. From the 1950s to the mid-1970s the main aim of

agricultural production systems was to produce a maximum amount of products at low costs and with a minimal labour input (Bieleman, 1998). Hence, efficiency and productivity were strong focus points driven by a process of mechanisation and large-scale production (Meerburg et al., 2009). After the mid-1970s, societal organisations raised their voices about unwanted effects of intensified agricultural systems on environment and nature, such as pollution, decreased biodiversity and poor animal welfare. At the same time, the number of people involved in agriculture decreased and Western societies became more urbanised. Hence,

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people's spatial and social distance to agriculture in present times is relatively large compared to several decades ago. As a consequence many people have limited knowledge about the way food is produced (Cloke, 2003; Fauconnier et al., 1992; Frouws, 1998; Wiskerke 2009).

Of the sustainability pillars economy, environment (e.g. Cornelissen, 2003; Mollenhorst, 2005; Thomassen, 2008; Van Calker, 2005) and society farmers and animal scientists tend to put emphasis on the economic and environmental pillar and largely ignore the socio-cultural pillar. Socio-cultural sustainability is about values i.e. aspects that matter to people which are often aspects that are appreciated or that are subject of concern (Boogaard et al., 2008). Over the last decade (2000–2010), the socio-cultural pillar gained more importance, as animal production was confronted with increased societal criticism about animal welfare issues, outbreaks of animal diseases and environmental pollution. Consequently, it has become important to know what citizens appreciate and what they are concerned about; for example, the search and realisation of animal welfare improvements is strongly driven by citizen expectations (Vanhonacker et al., 2008). McGlone (2001) and Boogaard et al. (2008) concluded that social concerns of animal farming extend beyond animal welfare issues. A study about social perceptions of dairy farming in which Dutch dairy farms were visited with citizen panels identified ten socio-cultural themes of dairy farming (Boogaard et al., 2008). Integration of such social demands and values in the production sector is a prerequisite to justify animal production within society and government (Verbeke et al., 2010). The objective of the present study is therefore to gain further insights into the socio-cultural sustainability pillar of animal production.

1.2. Social perceptions of animal production

Considering the fact that most citizens have little direct experiences with contemporary animal farming they can be referred to as 'lay people'. Many studies about lay people's perceptions of animal production and animal welfare focused on the consumer (e.g. Eurobarometer, 2005; Frewer et al., 2005; Weatherell et al., 2003). However, it has been widely studied that a discrepancy exists between what people think in their role as citizen and how they behave in their consumer role (e.g. Aarts and Te Velde, 2001; Dagevos and Sterrenberg, 2003; Kanis et al., 2003; Krystallis et al., 2009). Moreover, citizens may have different concerns than consumers. For example, consumers consider quality, price and taste of animal products of major importance, whereas citizens express their concern about other issues such as the way animals are treated and environmental pollution (Beekman, 2003). The present study thus focused on people in their role of citizen instead of their consumer role.

It can be stated that many citizens have a romantic view of animal farming on the one hand – referring to the 'rural idyll' in which humans and animals live in perfect harmony – but on the other hand citizens are also confronted with images in the media about intensified animal production, including issues about poor animal welfare (e.g. Boogaard et al., 2010a, 2010b; Kanis et al. 2003). Studies of Hall and Sandilands (2007) and Lassen et al. (2006) showed that citizens strongly base their perception of animal farming on what they have

seen on television 'I've seen a TV documentary' and 'I watched TV the other day...'. The media often show negative images of farm animal welfare (Te Velde et al., 2002; Vanhonacker et al., 2008).

In contrast, real life experiences with animal farming could influence people's perception of animal production and welfare. Studies about social perceptions of dairy farming showed that people with more agricultural experience were more positive about contemporary dairy farming and were accepting modern developments in dairy farming more than people without such experiences (Boogaard et al., 2006, 2010b). However, when lay people are confronted with the actual intensive pig production systems, they may react negatively and negative feelings about farming might emerge (Krystallis et al., 2009). Yet, studies of people's perceptions on the basis of real-life pig farms are lacking (Krystallis et al., 2009).

Hence, there is a need to better understand citizens' perceptions of pig production based on real-life experiences (Krystallis et al., 2009). The present study therefore focused on social perceptions of pig production in the Netherlands and Denmark and addressed the following research questions: 1) What do citizens notice on a pig farm? 2) Which of these aspects of pig production do they appreciate and consider as important to preserve for the future? 3) Which of these aspects of pig production are they concerned about and consider as important to change in the future? 4) Do citizens of different countries, in this case the Netherlands and Denmark, differ in their perception of pig production?

The paper is divided into five sections. After the *Introduction*, we describe pig production in the Netherlands and Denmark and discuss social issues on the basis of literature. The third section describes the methodology – farm visits with citizen panels. Thereafter, we present the results in which we identified socio-cultural aspects, issues and themes of pig production in the Netherlands and Denmark. In the final section we reflect on the results and methodology and discuss the findings in relation to the literature and the debate of sustainable animal farming.

2. Pig production and society

2.1. Pig production in the Netherlands and Denmark

The present study focused on pig production in the Netherlands and Denmark. These are North-West European countries with comparable pig production systems. Denmark, with a population density of 127 inhabitants/km², can be described as more 'rural' compared to the Netherlands which is strongly urbanised, with a population density of 401 inhabitants/km² (United Nations, 2010). We expected that this difference in population density can affect citizens' perception of pig production, in the sense that Danish people might be more connected to agricultural production compared to Dutch citizens.

In 2008, Denmark is at the fifth position on the list of largest pig populations in Europe with 13.6 million pigs closely followed by the Netherlands at the sixth position with 11.2 million pigs (Christensen et al., 2008). In both countries, the number of pig farms decreased over the last decades, whereas the number of pigs per farm increased. Pig production in the Netherlands and Denmark discerns three

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