

EurSafe News

European Society for Agricultural and Food Ethics



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New Report

If small is beautiful, is health local? And what about food safety?

Economic concentration was a key issue in three workshops in the UK circling around Power in the Food System. Other key issues were health and food safety. But how are concerns about safety and con-centration related? The workshops are summarized in a new report providing questions for reflection.

by Gitte Meyer & Geir Tveit

In March 2005 four huge retailers – Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury's and Morrisons/Safeway accounted for 76,5 per cent of the UK grocery market. Tesco alone accounted for 29,6 per cent of that figure. This example of corporate con-centration in the British food sector has been brought forward by Bill Vorley, International Institute for Environment and Development and is quoted in the report Power in the Food System. Understanding trends and improving accountability. The report has been prepared by the British non-governmental Food Ethics Council on the basis of three workshops – and a parallel-running on-line forum – taking place in May and July 2005,

focusing, respectively, on government, business and civil society.

The issue of economic concentration played a key role in discussions at the workshops, each of which gathered around 40 participants, whom the report classifies as "campaigners, researchers, civil servants, business people and writers".

Different responses and perspectives were brought together at the workshops and in the report, thus opening questions for further reflection, not the least about the complicated relations between concerns about health and food safety on the one hand, and about concentration versus decentralization on the other. While some responses were, in a straightforward way, about regulation aimed at fighting economic concentration by furthering competition at the national and at the international level, most of the responses were less direct.

Local vs. macro-scale

The report stresses the fact that the workshop series was designed as a learning process for all involved, and that it was not meant to be an exercise in building consensus over an agenda for improved accountability in the food system. However, three approaches struck the organisers as being particularly important. Two of these approaches were 'public sector procurement' and 'food sovereignty.' The discussions being reported on those issues – fusing the issues of economic and geographic concentration – emphasize local initiatives as a way of discouraging a move towards concentration of power in the food system, and as a way of promoting healthy eating.

About public sector procurement the report points to the argument that changing procurement practices in organisations like schools, hospitals and prisons could help to increase local sourcing, improve people's diets, and even encourage high labour standards in food production. Along similar lines, proposals that aim at supporting smallholders and food production for local markets are being pointed to in the discussion of food sovereignty.

The above responses, aimed at decentralization, fitted well with examples presented during one of the workshops by Paul Sander-Jackson from Somerset Food Links. The examples are referred to in the report as "successful local civil society responses to macro-scale failures of governance". The

report summarizes that "In the first case, Somerset Food Links had connected producer and consumer interests through farmers' markets, [...] With micro-level government support, the organisation had created a situation where farmers could set prices and make money, and where consumers benefitted from a greater range of outlets from which to buy their food." The other example concerned school meals services that had been de-regulated by the government, according to the report with the effect that "private companies were funded by the state to sell unhealthy food to children, with major health consequences." The report concludes that "Somerset Food Links has helped to counteract this failure by working with Somerset County Services to change their procurement practices and make health a priority. Over a six-month period the services have moved to 20 percent local sourcing."

Other responses aimed at mechanisms for controlling and, if necessary, sanctioning producers of food for a wider market. As an example food labelling that revealed not only the distance a food had travelled but also its mode of transport was discussed. A general point was that "clear, mandatory and accessible public complaints procedures were crucial". Another approach backed by many was 'naming and shaming'. Proposals were made in the on-line forum by the Gene Campaign about establishing an international fund to create a certification process for companies, foods, farmers and producers. Certification criteria would include their treatment of suppliers, input standards, market share, consumer responsiveness, corporate giving and roles in promoting food security. It was also proposed that "independent Food Policy Boards could be established at the local level, providing a mechanism through which representative groups of stakeholders could hold public bodies to account". Thus, a principle of localism was suggested; the local level should control the central level.

Farmers' markets, box schemes and community-supported agriculture are additional examples of approaches aimed at strengthening local production, that were proposed during the workshops.

Food safety: a joker

As seen from the above, the report provides an overview of a variety of approaches that may be applied in order to support the consumption of locally produced food, thereby supporting local food production and local community. At the same time, however, it also provides food for thought on how concerns about geographical and economic concentration – concerns that move along the axes of 'local versus central' and of 'small-scale versus large-scale' – may be related to other concerns about health and food safety.

A clue of the complexity of the latter question is provided by the report stating that internationally, the oligopsony power of European retailers – the power of a small number of companies that account for a large proportion of demand which allows them to force down purchase prices – has been "strengthened by producer-led food safety and quality assurance schemes." Thus, concerns and arguments about health and food safety appear not to be related to local and small-scale production in a straightforward manner. Rather, the aim of providing safe food of a high quality, being used to promote decentralization as well as in moves toward concentration, seems capable of making itself useful to conflicting

purposes regarding the issues of economic and geographical concentration. In effect, although arguments about health and food safety are frequently used as a trump card in discussions on food production, it may make more sense to conceive of them as a joker, the function of which is highly dependent on interpretation. Different interpretations of the notions of health and food safety may – or may not – relate to the issues of economic and geographical concentration in the food sector. The report leaves the door open for further reflection on this and on the question of to what extent the concentration should be seen as a safety problem, or as a democratic problem, or as a combination of the two.

The report 'Power in the Food System. Understanding trends and improving accountability' is issued by Food Ethics Council and can be found – together with a background paper to the workshops it summarizes, a detailed workshop programme, slides and notes from the workshop presentations, links to work by other organisations, and an on-line forum running parallel to the workshops – at www.foodethicscouncil.org/resources.htm

EurSafe Institutional Members Meeting:

The discussion behind the label

A minimal threshold established by governmental regulations, voluntary certification systems, and a crucial role for retailers. According to the participants of EurSafe's institutional members meeting, this is the most promising strategy to enhance sustainable production in the food sector and to take corporate social responsibility seriously.

by Franck L.B. Meijboom, Ethics Institute, Utrecht University

About 20 members subscribed to the EurSafe Institutional Members Meeting 13 May 2005 entitled "Corporate Social Responsibility: Labelling and Ethics". After a welcome by dr. Henk Schouten of Plant Research International

in Wageningen, who hosted the meeting, the president of EurSafe, prof. Peter Sandøe introduced the main theme of the meeting.

High quality olive oil

Prof. Claudio Peri, former vice president of EurSafe and currently the president of the TreE Association provided the first lecture. In his presentation, he showed a clear example of the possibilities and problems of developing a certification system for olive oil production. In establishing the TreE Association, the initiators aim to enhance quality on different levels. First, the quality in the sense of taste, but also regarding production and processing methods. Moreover, it aims to enhance the valorisation of local quality in a global context. Olive oil produced under TreE conditions should be a

guarantee for high quality products that can be trusted. This trust can be based on the honesty and transparency of the system and the competence of the involved producers. Both are crucial for the success of the certification system. Honesty is guaranteed by a clear documentation of the process of production and processing, internal inspection and external control. Competence is warranted by objective parameters, like the level of UV-absorption that should result in a superior quality of the oil.

The TreE certification system still provides room for individual differences between producers, like regional differences of the olive oil, pricing, and the choice for a single or multiple variety of oils. Furthermore, the Association tries to function as an information network that increases the transparency regarding olive oil, aims to be a learning organisation that values reflection and discussion, and functions as an open organisation that organises exhibitions. In combining these aspects, TreE hopes to contribute to a more sustainable and high quality production of olive oil. However, as an inevitable consequence it results in higher costs and a high price for the oil, which raises the question whether consumers will pay the price.

Room for ethics

Michiel Korthals, professor of applied philosophy at Wageningen University started his presentation with the consumers. Next to the normal traceability regarding food safety, he proposed an ethical traceability. Consumers formulate a variety of concerns on all levels of the food chain, but it is not always clear where in the chain and how these concerns are explicitly addressed. This is even more complicated by the diversity of concerns and their dynamic character. Korthals argued that the current focus on fixed norms and guidelines drawn by experts is not the most promising. Such norms provide certainty, but they lack the possibility to enhance trust since they miss the flexibility that is inherent to the concerns and thus cannot be pro-active. Hence, we need so-called ethical room for manoeuvre (ERM).

The ERM focuses on different aspects like the structure of the debate (e.g. clarity on who provides input), the context, and the conditions (e.g. a balance of power between participants). This notion of ERM should enhance the possibilities for ethical issues and consumer concerns to be addressed on different levels in the

food chain. In comparison to fixed guides and norms, Korthals argued that this ethical room for manoeuvre is better equipped for making the food chain responsive and pro-active regarding ethical issues.

Quality and international trade

The fact that dealing with sustainability, corporate responsibility and other ethical issues is not that easy in a global context was highlighted in the lecture of Paul Geraards from LTO (Dutch Organisation for Agriculture and Horticulture). Being an interest organisation for agriculture, LTO is in favour of clear certifying systems. However, more sustainable production and higher quality result in higher costs and higher prices. This is problematic as this kind of increase in costs cannot be compensated by the use of subsidies, because the WTO agreements do not allow such disruption of the international market. More than once the aim of liberalisation of the market and the related prohibition of discrimination on product methods have turned out to be incompatible with attempts to produce in a more sustainable or more animal-friendly way. In practice, only non-governmental and voluntary certification systems seem to be able to survive.

An example is EurepGAP who describes itself as a “global partnership for safe and sustainable agriculture”. This organisation explicitly emphasises that it responds to the demands of consumers, retailers and their global suppliers and focus on sector specific farm certification standards in order to ensure integrity, transparency and harmonisation of global agricultural standards. According to Geraards, this is a promising and realistic way of enhancing a more sustainable and responsible way. The problem, however, is that its strength is its weakness. The fact that it can flourish within a WTO context is its voluntary character. No one is forced to or even obliged to comply with the certification standards. Hence, EurepGAP finds it rather difficult to get all potential partners in the organisation and to keep them there, since it remains attractive to produce on low costs, untroubled by any standard or certifying authority. Geraards fears a situation in which the cheap products are in the same supermarket as those produced under EurepGAP conditions.

Retailers and sustainability

The supermarkets, their line of products and their consumers were the central theme in the final presentation by Claude Francotte from Carrefour Belgium. As the biggest retailer in Europe, Carrefour is regularly confronted with questions of certification and labelling. Carrefour has its own special line of products labelled "Les Filières Qualité Carrefour (FQC)". These products are focussed on better quality on both material and immaterial level. Products only get a FQC label after a strict process that covers the whole chain from farm to fork in which the selection of and contact with producers are crucial.

Within this concept it is still possible to sell high quality products from local origin. Moreover, eco-products are available. Even though Carrefour is not leading in this field, the company aims to combine eco-products with aspects of sustainability like ecologically sound packaging and it organises regular campaigns to draw attention to this line of product. Also for a retailer sustainable products are worthwhile selling, but companies like Carrefour cannot survive if they were only selling high quality and sustainable, i.e. highly priced products. This market is relevant and important, but not extensive enough: they need the low-price products on their shelves as well.

After the presentations, there was a lively discussion that focussed on the tension between the awareness of the importance and relevance of a more sustainable way of producing and processing on the one hand, and all kinds of economic, practical and political problems that seem to frustrate this aspiration on the other

hand. The relevance of corporate responsibility and enhancing sustainability are maybe more and more shared by the sector, but how can you prevent that you will lose your position if you start to produce in a sustainable way? It was stressed that the added value of sustainable products should be as clear as possible to the consumer. A clear quality-price relation is crucial. If there is the willingness to pay the extra price a lot of certification standards are possible, also regarding animal welfare, child labour, etc. Such certification standards cannot be enforced by government because of the WTO agreements. Governmental enforcement, however, is not crucial for certification systems to function properly.

During the discussion, retailers were conceived to be in a better position than a regulatory framework to guarantee that their products meet the standards of external certification. A voluntary system is the most promising strategy, especially in combination with the buying power of retailers that can be used in order to change the direction in the chain. However, unsustainable products will stay for reasons of competition. Hence, the role of government is not marginal. By formulating minimal standards, government should establish a threshold that is applicable to all products. Such standards are not enough for enhancing sustainability, but are important to create a context in which other partners can take more responsibility.

EurSafe aims at organising a meeting for its institutional members every year. Institutional members that are interested in hosting or co-organising the next meeting are kindly requested to contact the secretary:

frans.brom@wur.nl

Conferences & Meetings

2005

Sep 29

Small Wonders - Big Questions (Copenhagen - Denmark)

A seminar on the integration of ethical thinking in the development of nanotechnology, organised by the Danish Centre for Bioethics and Risk Assessment

www.bioethics.kvl.dk

Sep 29-30

The Future of Rural Development - Making It Simpler, More Coherent and Effective (Maastricht - The Netherlands)

Organised by The European Institute of Public Administration (EIPA)

e-mail: w.curfs@eipa-nl.com

Oct 17

If food could talk ... Hidden histories from the food chain (London - UK)

The Guild of Food Writers marks World Food Day.
www.foodethicscouncil.org

Oct 26-27

What Can Nano Learn from Bio? (East Lansing, Michigan - USA)

Lessons from the Debate over Agrifood
Biotechnology and GMOs.
Michigan State University
<http://www.carrs.msu.edu/nanoconference/>

Oct 28-29

Science and Security (Heidelberg - Germany)

European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO)
and European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL)
<http://www.embo.org/projects/scisoc/scisoc2005.html>

Nov 2-5

Policies and Strategies for Promoting Rice Production and Food Security in Sub-Saharan Africa (Cotonou - Benin)

Africa Rice Center (WARDA)
<http://www.warda.org/ricepolicy/index.htm>

Nov 3-4

Scanbalt Forum 2005: Scanbalt Campus - Research and Excellence (Oslo - Norway)

Sessions on a.o. Biomaterials and Nanotechnology,
Stem Cells, Agro-Biotech, Bioethics ...
www.scanbalt.org

Nov 4-5

Labeling Genetically Modified Food (Columbia, Missouri - USA)

An Interdisciplinary Conference at the University of
Missouri-Columbia, Philosophy Department.
http://www.missouri.edu/~weirichp/food_conference/food_conference.htm

Nov 14-15

Communicating European Research 2005 International Conference (Brussels - Belgium)

The event will focus on the manifold aspects of
science communication and will also take stock of the
way towards the Seventh Framework Programme
http://europa.eu.int/comm/research/conferences/2005/cer2005/index_en.html

Nov 14-18

Integrating Livestock-Crop Systems to Meet the Challenges of Globalisation (Khon Kaen - Thailand)

Organized jointly by the British Society of Animal
Science (BSAS) and the Animal Husbandry
Association of Thailand (AHAT)
<http://www.bsasahat.kku.ac.th/welcom.htm>

Nov 27-Dec 2

Biotechnology Havana 2005: For a Sustainable Food Production (Havana - Cuba)

Dr. Mario Pablo Estrada García:

BH2005@cigb.edu.cu

<http://bh2005.cigb.edu.cu>

2006

**22-24 June 2006:
the 6th EurSafe Congress
Oslo, Norway**

***Ethics and the
Politics of Food***

<http://eursafe2006.etikkom.no>

deadline for submission of
abstracts: **1 February 2006**

March 27-29

British Society of Animal Science Annual Meeting (York - UK)

www.bsas.org.uk/Meetings_&_Workshops/

April 27-29

What is Global Ethics and how to research it? (Gent - Belgium)

Centre for Ethics & Value Inquiry (CEVI), Ghent
University

Deadline for submission of abstracts: **1 Dec 2005**.
<http://www.cevi-globoethics.be/page.php?FILE=subiect&LAN=E&ID=265&PAGE=1>

May 14-18

VALDOR - VALues in Decisions On Risk (Stockholm - Sweden)

The symposium is arranged to support the further
development of transparent risk management. The
organizers take a holistic and democratic approach
to societal decision-making in complex issues which
almost always include risk related matters

Deadline for submission of abstracts: **20 Oct 2005**.
www.congrex.com/valdor2006

May 30-31

Joint Organic Congress 2006 (Odense - Denmark)

Conference will examine what research in organic
food and farming can offer in regard to the develop-
ment of agriculture and food production, rural devel-
opment and environmental protection in Europe.

Claus Bo Andreasen: Clausbo.Andreasen@agrsci.dk
www.organic-congress.org

June 7-12

Place, taste, and sustenance: The Social Spaces of Food and Agriculture (Boston, Massachusetts - USA)

Joint Annual Meetings of the Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society (AFHVS) and the Association for the Study of Food and Society (ASFS)
Deadline for submission of abstracts: **10 Feb 2006**.
<http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/rhaynes/afhvs/NextMeeting.htm>

Aug 6- 10

11th International Congress of Human Genetics (Brisbane – Australia)

John C MacMillan: ichg2006@icms.com.au
www.ichg2006.com/index.cfm?MenuID=0

Sep 4-6

IX Congress of the European Society for Agronomy (Warsaw - Poland)

www.esagr.org/structure/

Books & Reports

New books

Bioethics: An Introduction for the Biosciences

by T B Mepham, Oxford University Press (May, 2005) ISBN: 0-19-926715-4

<http://www.oup.co.uk/isbn/0-19-926715-4>

In Defense of Animals. The Second Wave

edited by Peter Singer, Blackwell Publishing (2006)
ISBN: 1-4051-1941-1

<http://www.blackwellpublishing.com>

Attitudes of Consumers Towards the Welfare of Farmed Animals

The European Commission (June 2005)

Special Eurobarometer 229 / 63.2. Available for download from:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_229_en.pdf

Power in the food system. Understanding trends and improving accountability

Food Ethics Council (July 2005)

www.foodethicscouncil.org/resources.htm

New reports

The Ethics of Research Involving Animals

Nuffield Council on Bioethics (May 2005)

ISBN: 1-9043-8410-2

www.nuffieldbioethics.org/go/ourwork/animalresearch/publication_178.html

The hidden values. Transparency in decision-making processes dealing with hazardous activities

by Birgitte Rasmussen & Karsten Klint Jensen, Danish Centre for Bioethics and Risk Assessment (June 2005)

<http://www.bioethics.kvl.dk/eindex.htm>

Membership information

Earlier EurSafe membership and financial administration was run by the Eursafe executive secretariat. From December 2004, however, De Beek Group in The Hague, an office specialized in carrying out organization and business administration has taken over the tasks of both membership and financial administration of EurSafe. All membership affairs, including subscriptions, renewals and handling fees are taken care of by De Beek Group. It also takes care of the Eur-Safe members' subscriptions to JAEE (Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics) and the members' need of information, addresses, etc. The contact address is:

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Membership fees shall now be paid directly to the EurSafe Membership Administration. It will no longer be connected with the EurSafe Congress fees.

EurSafe information

Executive Secretariat

The executive secretariat of EurSafe is provided by **Paul den Besten**, who also is director of the Royal Netherlands Society of Agricultural Sciences. Paul can be reached by e-mail at: paul.denbesten@wur.nl
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Deadline for the next issue: 25 November 2005