

Food Labelling & Stakeholder Network(s): A David vs. Goliath Fight Between NGO and Business Interests?

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Abstract

This thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of how the governance system of the European Union works. It does so by analysing a particular case, the proposal for a regulation on food information to consumers. The Commission's objective is to increase the relevance of food labelling for consumers, as well as to create a level playing field for the food industry. By being broad in scope the draft proposal has attracted a lot of attention from a wide range of stakeholders, particularly from the food industry, consumer and public health NGOs. The dossier has also obtained much attention in the media, where it has been spoken of as a "lobby slaughter" by the food industry, particularly with regard to the issue of "front of pack labelling".

Through a policy network analysis the main research question is if an asymmetry in the representation of business interests vs. civil society can be found when assessing the food labelling regulation proposal. The sub-question asked is if structures of resource dependency can be identified that describe the existence of an issue network between the involved stakeholders. The focus lies predominantly on the sub-issue which has received most attention in the media, namely front of pack labelling. Preliminary outcomes have been reached on it at first reading stage as well. The hypothesis tested is that, when regarding the food labelling proposal as a whole, structures of an issue network can be found in which no stakeholder systematically overrules the other. Decision making at EU level appears to be based on compromise, in which one actor "wins" on one issue, but "loses out" on another one. Hence, evidence of a real asymmetry of interest representation cannot be found. With regards to the sub-issue front of pack labelling, the results look somewhat different. At this sub-level, interdependencies between food industry and NGO representatives are very weak. Instead of one, two sub-issue networks are identified: one comprising industry, the other consumer and public health stakeholders. EU institutions appear insulated from the pressure of those two sub-issue networks. Therefore, although they are stronger than organisations representing consumer and public health priorities,

evidence does not suggest that business interests dominate. Other variables such as the quality of information provided, the EU officials' personal points of view, as well as trust seem to be more relevant. This study focuses predominantly on the Brussels route of interest representation. It therefore paves the way for further research to be carried out in the field of multi-level governance, particularly in relation to the activity of organisations at the national level.