

The Dutch Agreement to Reduce Overweight is a Case Study of the Impact of the Food Sector on Collaborative Governance

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Introduction

Governments are replacing and enhancing traditional top-down methods of public regulation with more interactive forms of collaborative governance in the development of food policies. In this scenario, governments consult with relevant members of the market and civil society in an effort to collectively decide on a set of measures by getting each party to agree to conduct separate actions that further the common good. A wide range of voluntary agreements, covenants, pledges, pacts, public-private partnerships, or "deals" with specific policy aims, ambitions, and metrics are produced by these new hybrid forms of food governance. While collaborative governance techniques are being applied in other policy areas, the usage of these agreements has been particularly significant in environmental regulations. This comprises regulations relating to the relationship between food and public health, with the issue of obesity and overweight being one of the most significant areas of application [1].

Description

Food industry actors frequently participate in the group of stakeholders that deliberate and negotiate these voluntary agreements because combating overweight and obesity invariably necessitates taking into account measures addressing nutrition and food intake. This strategy's proponents contend that food producers, retailers, restaurants, and caterers can implement a variety of measures to improve public health outcomes, such as by reformulating products, encouraging consumers to choose healthier options, altering menu offerings, or implementing pricing strategies. Their participation in these processes is another cause for concern because industry may use it as a means of delaying and weakening VAs, rendering them ultimately unfit to act as an effective substitute for public regulation [2].

The usefulness of VAs has been extensively studied in the literature, but little is known about how the food sector exerts influence during the drafting of this VAs. Research on the UK Public Health Responsibility Agreement stands out as an important exception since it has received a lot of attention from a variety of researchers. These investigations discovered that the sector was able to drastically weaken and soften the steps they made a commitment to implement, which contributes to the explanation of why VAs are not very successful.

I first review the literature on collaborative governance and the involvement of the food sector. I utilise the idea of arenas to illustrate three related tactics the food business employs. First, the industry aggressively campaigns for

the adoption of policies that avoid formal law and instead promote the use of collaborative governance to create VAs. Second, it is successful in retaining a tight hold on the regulations they must follow in this new environment and formulates these as vaguely and weakly as possible. Thirdly, in order to increase its negotiating leverage and oppose reforms, it supplements the co-opting of these measures inside the arena with aggressive backstage lobbying outside the arena [3].

Several motives for using VAs have been identified by governance researchers. The first is that VAs enable for the leveraging of a wide range of actors' experience, knowledge, concerns, and interests, leading to outcomes that are both materially superior and can rely on the backing of important players that are required for achieving the policy goals (Halfon and Hochstein, 2002). The hope is that these deliberative processes will lead to better answers to policy issues than if they were imposed from the top down. Additionally, when governments are successful in bringing together a large and representative collection of key actors from all pertinent fields, a collaborative governance approach may produce more thorough, the fact that internationalisation and globalisation processes may have severely restricted national governments' ability to employ public regulation to achieve particular policy goals is a third argument in favour of VAs. This is especially true of policies that might impede commerce by interfering with the free flow of products between nations. A famous case in the EU is a Belgian rule that limits the amount of salt in bread to 2% in order to preserve consumer health. The Belgian government's justification that this was necessary to safeguard the public was rejected by the Court of Justice of the European Union, which found that this statute violated EU regulations on the free movement of goods [4,5].

Conclusion

The Dutch government decided to implement preventative policies through a covenant that would have broad support from all society stakeholders, including corporations, which led to the decision of the Health Secretary to nevertheless let the industry "get away" with very minimal promises. In other words, the Health Secretary's job mainly involved following procedures. Because of this, when several lawmakers later questioned him about why a sugar levy wasn't included, he responded that while the food industry was indeed opposed to such a measure, everyone ultimately agreed to "a package of measures which was supported by all signatories" which included the substitute for sugar reduction proposed by the industry.

Acknowledgement

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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