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Animal-farming practices and consumer trust.

The case of Finland.

Pekka Jokinen & Saara Kupsala & Markus Vinnari

Pekka Jokinen, Faculty of Social Sciences and Regional Studies, 80101 University of Joensuu, Finland; pekka.jokinen@joensuu.fi. Jokinen is the contact person for the paper.

Saara Kupsala, Faculty of Social Sciences and Regional Studies, 80101 University of Joensuu, Finland; saara.kupsala@ymparisto.fi

Markus Vinnari, Faculty of Social Sciences and Regional Studies, 80101 University of Joensuu, Finland; markus.vinnari@joensuu.fi

1.INTRODUCTION: THE POLITICISED FARM ANIMAL WELFARE

Food consumption has become politicised and contested even if the dominant European policy discourse still tends to associate food issues mainly with agricultural productivity and pays less attention to environmental loss or consumption (e.g. Potter & Tilzey 2005). Consumer trust in the mainstream production system has particularly declined because of food scandals such as the bird flu, salmonella and dioxin crises (e.g. Ansell & Vogel 2006). In late modern societies, the consequences of meat consumption are becoming more evident due to the increasing knowledge of animals combined with food stuff development (e.g. Buller & Morris 2003).

Animal welfare is a central issue in the politicisation of food consumption, and there has been considerable increase in demand for “animal friendly” products (such as organic products) and vegetarianism (e.g. Harper & Makatouni 2002; Macnaghten 2004). It is clearly contested what constitutes animal welfare and care for animals, and also the question of what the disputes over animal welfare are basically a “case” of (e.g. policy failure, institutional change, the risk society, or moral transition) remains open (e.g. Fraser 2008; Johnston 2008). The meanings given to the notion of farm animal welfare are influenced by various factors such as convictions, norms, knowledge and interests. It has been found, for instance, that producers tend to position themselves as knowledgeable and rational actors and dismiss the concerns of the lay person as emotional and uninformed (Vanhonacker et al 2007). Yet, the public often associates the industry’s interest in animal welfare as economic and profit-oriented, and view its own viewpoint as ethically motivated.

“Sustainable consumption” has become a core policy objective in national and international arenas even though its definition is far from precise (e.g. Hobson 2002). It is ordinarily defined as consumption of more efficiently produced goods, but there is continuing need to learn more about consumer behaviours and to promote public trust in food issues. Consumption can, indeed, also be understood as a collective enterprise and citizen-consumers thus as actors who participate in social practices shared with others (Shove & Ward 2002; Martens & Spaargaren 2005). As Shah et al (2007) have noted it is important to clarify the ways consumption has become politicised. In the case of farm animal welfare, the relationship between consumption and citizenship obviously has to do with taste cultures, political ideologies, and social networks, for instance.

The Nordic countries are typically known as high-trust societies in terms of food issues (Kjaernes et al. 2006; Halkier et al. 2007). This refers to trust in food safety but also in public authorities and consumer organisations. On the other, distrust may express a healthy scepticism, but it can also represent a deeper suspicion of existing institutional arrangements

and regulatory bodies; institutions that perform well generate trust and vice versa (Pellizzoni 2005). One of the critical factors affecting the trust on food production is the structural change in agriculture. As in other northern-western European countries, in Finland the number of farms has fallen drastically and the average farm size is increasing rapidly. Furthermore, the cultural structure of Finnish society is in transition and it follows that the cultural distance between urban and rural ways of living has increased noticeably. Not surprisingly, there is a pretty strong public discussion taking place in Finland on how consumers can actually be aware of the ways in which farm animals are treated.

The main interest of this paper is if social developments are leading to a broad greening of food consumption. The paper is related to the research project on citizen-consumers and animal welfare which we have started this year¹ and its main focus is on the case of Finland. The paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss animal welfare in the context of broad social changes and examine how the Finnish food industry has broadened its perspectives around the meat issue during last decades. This is followed by discussion on macro-level factors affecting meat consumption. This section includes an empirical comparison of the European trajectories of meat consumption. Finally, the trust in food is explored by paying attention particularly to the case of Finland with the survey material related to consumer perspectives on trust and animal welfare.

2.SOCIAL CHANGES AND A NEW EPOCH IN ANIMAL WELFARE?

Generally speaking, the gap between food production and consumption is growing. As Bildtgård (2008) has noted, consumers are less and less involved in the actual production of

¹ This study – “Politicised Animals: the Consumer and Farm Animals” – is carried out in 2009-2012 at the University of Joensuu, Finland, and it is funded by the Academy of Finland. It is focusing on citizen-consumer understandings of livestock production. The purpose is to explore how Finnish consumers see animal-farming practices and what kinds of cultural meanings they associate with farm-animal welfare. A further aim is to investigate the opportunities consumers have to influence farm-animal welfare in their everyday contexts.

The study will utilise both qualitative and quantitative materials. In the first phase, ten structured group interviews are carried out (including 80-100 participants in total); they are started in the beginning of September 2009 with the first five groups involving people who share a particular interest in animal farming issues (vegans /vegetarians, organic consumers, health oriented consumers, gastronomes, hunters). They are followed by another five group interviews in January 2010. The qualitative data will be complemented in 2010 with a large survey data.

their food. Home food production is limited to the final cooking and preparation of the meal, and even this part of the process has slowly been taken over by restaurants and ready-made food. Thus, (especially urban) consumers are increasingly distanced from farming, and their consciousness of current animal management practices is concurrently weakening. In principle, this can result in declining trust in livestock production but also in growing politicisation of farm animal issues.

The relationship between consumer roles and animal welfare can be linked to a major change in agricultural thinking referred to as the transition from the productivist to the post-productivist era (e.g. Marsden et al. 2002; Wilson & Rigg 2003). This shift implies a redefinition of the relationship between agriculture, environment and society. Productivist policies have been characterised by the discursive emphasis on food production, commodity production maximisation and rhetoric focusing on national self-sufficiency. Instead, according to the post-productivist thinking, agriculture has to respond to mounting demands of consumers, tax-payers and citizens concerning environmental quality, animal rights, food security and viability of rural areas, for instance. Consequently, the productivist economic rationale behind farming would inevitably become transformed and the farmers shall take into account values of positive and negative externalities they produce.

Since the concepts with the prefix 'post' have tended to describe changes as inevitable transitions replacing the previous era, researchers have also used the term non-productivism as the opposite of productivist action and thought (e.g. Wilson 2008). Further, also 'strongly multifunctional systems' has been used to refer to high food quality associated with more differentiated food demand by consumers and to enlightened visions about food and health. It has also been argued (e.g. Evans et al. 2002) that there is actually no empirical support for a broad rural change leading to some new and less productivist agriculture. However, even if post-productivism / non-productivism is a pretty general notion, it is interesting here for two reasons. First, it gives some promise for slowing down the treadmill of food production. Second, in any case the post-productivist-typed thinking is lengthening the cultural distance between food production and food consumption.

It is an interesting question whether and that to what extent the animal welfare issue is following a same kind of path of institutionalisation as various agricultural and environmental issues have done so far. For instance, in an examination of the institutional history and normalization of organic production in Denmark, Holm and Stauning (2002) have identified four stages of development, which illustrate the length of time spans in the processes of greening. Organic production has begun to grow from the cultural development of ideals on alternative food and become a political topic by awakening of discourses on non-toxic food, for instance. Further, the development has gone through the institutionalisation of organic

discourses and the integration of organic farming principles and practices into other policy areas (such as food quality and public purchasing).

The path of institutionalisation identified in the Danish case is quite similar to the ‘stages in the process of greening’ by Martens and Spaargaren (2005). They examine greening with regard to the number of environmentally sound alternatives available and the extent to which they have been incorporated into everyday routines. The phases of greening are labelled as acknowledgement, production of alternatives, adoption, and standardization. It is noted that only a modest level of progress has been achieved in the domain of food production and consumption, but there is potential for change in the increasing share of consuming organic food products, for instance. Interestingly, Martens and Spaargaren (ibid.) regard the choice of organic foods as a “dark green” expression of sustainable food-consumption practices but substituting meat with novel protein foods only as a “lighter green” choice.

In terms of greening and animal welfare, meat consumption is actually an indicative factor. Food production and consumption will cause less pressure on natural resources and animal welfare, if people choose to eat smaller quantities of meat as well as types of meat that are produced in a more responsible way (e.g. organic meat). Will meat consumption follow a kind of greening path and if it does, does it follow the path of organic production, for instance? Obviously, there are factors suggesting a same kind of path but also factors questioning the similarity of trajectories. An essential dissimilarity between organic production and meat production – at least in the Finnish case – is that organic products already have a strictly standardised, labelled and subsidised position and also a formal environmental-political substance whereas “sustainable” meat products do not.

We turn now to have a brief look on the transition of the meat consumption issue in Finland with the material by Finfood (Finnish Food Information), which is a public utility having about 300 Finnish foodstuff enterprises as its members. Finfood is mainly funded by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and its public functions are “to provide information on food and the foodstuff industry” and “to promote Finnish food culture within Finland and in European Union”. In order to carry out such tasks, Finfood publishes regularly survey reports on people’s attitudes towards meat consumption (the reports are based on surveys with the representative sample of the Finnish population).

We have explored Finfood’s datasets and reports published in 1984-2006 in order to identify the evolution of the interests of Finnish meat industry. The reports have been thickened and the Finnish meat industry has also extended its interests. As shown by the Figure 1, in the 1980s the industry mainly wanted to know which meat products could be sold most successfully and what the consumers do think about different meat products. In the early

1990s, the alternative to replace meat with other foodstuffs was acknowledged. Later on, the meat industry became also interested in consumers' views about farm animals and in consumer willingness to exclude meat from the diets. Overall, this examination shows that the knowledge interests of Finnish meat industry have changed in twenty years: they have broadened from the pure market data to information on decreasing meat consumption, animal welfare, and health issues.

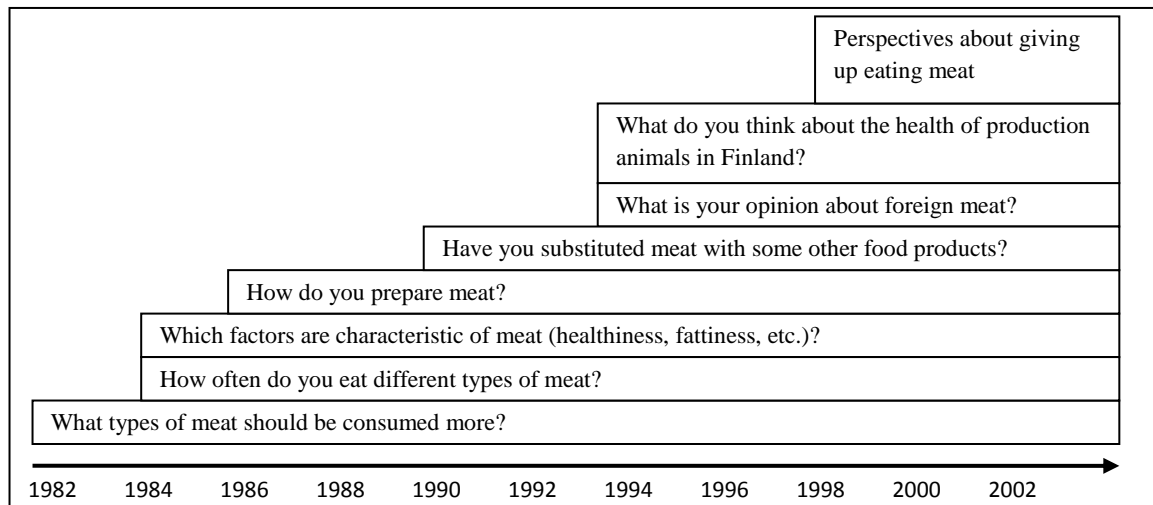


Figure 1. The origination of the areas of interest in the Finnish meat industry.

3.MEAT CONSUMPTION AS AN INDICATIVE FACTOR OF ANIMAL WELFARE?

In terms of the number of animals involved, animal agriculture presents the largest potential animal welfare issue (e.g. Boer et al 2007). According to York and Gossard (2004; Gossard & York 2003), it is important to understand factors influencing meat consumption in order to develop a more sustainable food production and distribution system. A macro-level approach suggests that the production of meat cannot simply be explained as a direct response to consumer demand, since production is strongly affected by government subsidies and industry groups, for instance. Yet, this perspective may explain aggregate levels of production and consumption, but it does not explain variation of individual consumer behaviour within a shared political economic context.

York and Gossard (2004) have found from their simple modernisation perspective that nations with highly urbanized populations consume more meat per capita than those with less urbanized populations. This leads to conclusion that at the global scale economic development appears to stimulate the expansion of meat and fish consumption. However, they justly note that the effect of economic development on meat consumption depends also on the cultural/geographic region of a nation. In another study, Gossard and York (2003) paid more attention to social structural factors and found that they are important mediators between macro-structural factors (such as political economic system) and psychological conditions. It follows the claim to understand the social context in which the practices of meat consumption take place since meanings, customs, and traditions may shape or constrain consumer patterns.

Also Frank (2008) has discussed a straightforward relation between economic development and meat consumption by utilising a possible “animal welfare Kuznets curve”. The Kuznets curve is originally a hypothesis proposing that increased economic development and income inequality have an inverted-U-shape. Its environmental version has suggested that environmental degradation increases with the growth of the economy up to a threshold level beyond which the quality of the environment improves with economic growth. Frank argues that there are in fact many reasons to expect that meat consumption will start declining as the economy continues to progress. Among them is increased animal welfare awareness due to scientific, philosophical and theological advances, for instance. There is seemingly some evidence suggesting that the concern on farm animal welfare is correlated with income. According to an EC study (2007), the residents in various European countries rated the importance of farm animal welfare and countries with higher per capita income generally had higher levels of concern for farmed animal welfare. Frank (2008) argues that this is consistent with other survey-based studies that have found willingness to pay for greater animal welfare in food products to be correlated with income.

We take a look at the possible connection between income level and meat consumption with the help of the developments of meat consumption in the European context. In Figure 2, total meat consumption in 1961-2001 is compared within the EU-15 countries. The horizontal axis indicates income level (GDP per person) and the vertical axis shows the level of total meat consumption (kilos per person). Hence, the lines are demonstrating the development of meat consumption in forty years.

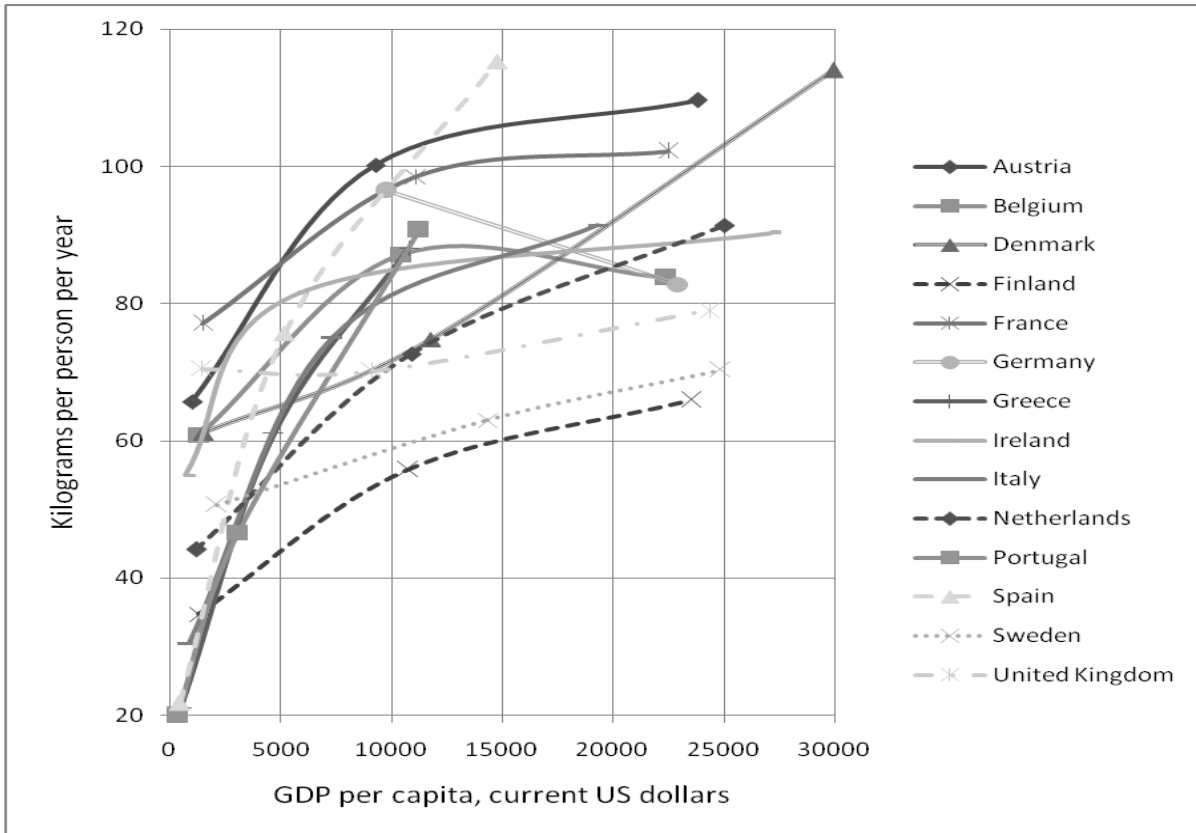


Figure 2. Total meat consumption 1961-2001 in EU-15 countries.

Overall, the variation in total meat consumption (i.e. bovine meat, pork, chicken meat, and other meat products) is quite high. Yet, especially during the 1970s, these countries moved rather strongly towards animal based food consumption. The largest meat consumption has taken place in Spain. Also Austria, Denmark and France rank high in this comparison. On the other, least meat has been consumed in Finland. It can also be found that, excepting Germany, meat consumption is still growing in these countries but the growth rate is slowing down (in punctual terms: in these EU-15 countries, the growth has slowed down from 28 kilos in 1961-1981 to 10 kilos in 1981-2001). Taken together, this data show that in Europe there is no simple connection between the income level and the decrease in meat consumption and, therefore, this exploration gives no support for the “affluence thesis” suggested by Frank (2008).

In a historical perspective, meat consumption remained fairly stable between 1900 and 1960 in Finland (Vinnari 2008). The modernisation and intensification of agricultural production led to the rapid increase particularly in pork production. Also the introduction of poultry

increased meat consumption in the early 1970s. In recent years, the consumption of poultry has still grown markedly which is mainly due the low costs of production; yet, poultry is also seen as a healthy (low fat) option. A bit more careful examination reveals also that beef consumption has in fact started to decrease slightly in Finland, but the rise in poultry consumption tends to keep the total meat consumption at the previous level.

4. TRUSTS IN ANIMAL WELFARE

As several authors have noted, consumption behaviour is a strengthening public arena of activism as well as an expression of citizenship (e.g. Seyfang 2005; Shah et al 2007). The mainstream approach to sustainable consumption tends to assume that consumers know and care about the social and environmental implications of their consumption habits and also have the motivation and opportunity to act on that knowledge to change their behaviour. However, the relationship between consumption and citizenship is more complicated (e.g. Dobson 2003; Soper 2007). If the “ecological citizen” aims to minimise the impacts of her or his consumption practices, quite different social institutions to facilitate sustainable choices may be required.

Another view on sustainable consumption may advocate the cutting of absolute levels of consumption (e.g., of meat) in order to reduce the ecological footprint of modern societies. Such a view resonates strongly with the idea of ecological citizenship. Localised food supply chains exemplify tools for alternative sustainable consumption in that the aim is to strengthen local economies, avoid unnecessary global food transportation, and reconnect local communities with farmers and the landscape (e.g. Jokinen et al 2009). In the effort to regain *trust* in food production, there is a growth in various initiatives promoting more transparent food chains that include certain environmental, social, food quality and animal welfare regulations. Examples of alternative food networks that have expanded significantly in recent years include organic farming, farmers’ markets, local food, fair trade, and slow food and quality food initiatives (e.g. Goodman 2003; McCarthy 2006; Morris & Kirwan 2006).

As comes to different forms of animal farming, studies have indicated that consumers tend to attach negative meanings to intensive livestock production, while extensive forms of animal farming are viewed more positively (e.g. Velde et al 2002; Torjusen & Terragni 2005). For instance, in a recent Eurobarometer survey, 58 percent of EU citizens regarded the welfare/protection of laying hens as fairly bad or very bad, and in the case of fattening pigs the figure was 44 percent (EC 2005). Qualitative studies have explained this negative attitude towards intensive farming, for instance, in terms of the iconic status consumers give to the natural life of animals when conceptualising animal welfare: animals are viewed as faring well

when they can perform their “natural” behaviour and live in conditions that mimic nature (e.g., outdoors and with natural light) (Miele & Evans 2006). This kind of animal welfare conceptualisation seems to be in a conflict with the views of producers and livestock experts. Namely, actors on the production side tend to emphasise more the physical healthiness and zoo-technical performance of animals rather than their ability to “lead a natural life” (e.g. Miele & Evans 2006; van Huik & Bock 2006).

However, animal welfare concerns are not reflected that much in actual consumption behaviour and health concerns appear to be the leading reason for the consumption changes. Furthermore, while a considerable proportion of consumers show highly negative attitudes to intensive animal farming in surveys, the extent of “animal friendly” consumption seems to be much lower (e.g. Schröder & McEachern 2004). Various reasons have been put forward to explain this well known gap between attitudes and behaviour, such as the limited availability and high price of alternative products, and unclear labelling systems (e.g. Harper & Makatouni 2002; O’Donovan & McCarthy 2002).

The Nordic countries are known as high-trust societies in food issues (Adam 2008). Trust affects food choices as they depend on such factors as the credibility of producers or sellers or the origin of food (the latter being often considered a stereotypical indicator of quality). In order to discuss the social basis for and the maintenance of trust, Bildtgård (2008) has interestingly distinguished three basic categories of trust in food. They are labelled emotional, habitual, and reflexive trust in food. *Emotional* trust refers to the fact that many trust relations still remain personal and they are based on moral obligations between people sharing an emotional bond. In the case of food, emotional trust is exemplified by our trust in our parents’ or friends’ cooking (we expect that they act according to values and norms that we share).

Habitual trust is based on the assumption that events occurring in the world will continue pretty much as they have before (most every day practices are guided by habits). *Policy-generated* trust is an important variation of habitual trust. It is founded on more or less conscious knowledge that there are institutions regulating the actions of others, which allows us to relax in our everyday dealings with other people. In the modern food system, the importance of policy-generated trust is increasing. The production of food involves nowadays an almost infinite number of actors, individuals and companies. The complexity of this system means that the consumer has very little knowledge of the end product, not primarily because knowledge is lacking but because it is too rich and too complex for the consumer to decode. Clear institutional support for food-safety issues seems to promote trust in food.

Finally, *reflexive* trust is based on the growth of scientific knowledge, which is also becoming more diversified (c.f. de Krom 2009). Therefore, people have to make conscious choices

concerning which forms of knowledge and which systems and actors to trust. Bildtgård (2008) identifies two situations in food choices in which reflexivity is activated. The first appears when some kind of problem arises in the food-selection process and routine fails to solve the problem (e.g. the food we used to trust is no longer manufactured). The second may appear when we encounter a new discourse problematising our food habits (e.g. the learning about the mad-cow disease or moral arguments for vegetarianism challenging one's food habits).

In Finland, we can observe a strengthening public discussion on how consumers can be aware of the ways farm animals are treated with. Quite surprisingly, however, Finnish citizens tend to express very high levels of trust towards the conventional livestock production and, correspondingly, a low concern on animal welfare issue. For instance, in the recent Eurobarometer survey (2005), Finns tend to be the most positive citizenry in the EU25 in their views concerning the welfare level of dairy cows and fattening pigs. As comes to cows, 85 % of Finns have a positive perception of their welfare and protection whereas the EU25 average is 66 % (*ibid.* 14). With the welfare of pigs, the corresponding numbers are 61 % and 45 % (*ibid.* 18). If these numbers are combined with the knowledge that only one third of Finns consider the conditions of farm animals when purchasing meat (*ibid.* 27), the awareness on animal welfare appears actually very low in Finland.

Further, Finland seems to be an extreme case in the EU25 concerning the trust in animal welfare legislation. 86% of Finns believe that there exists European legislation on the transport of farmed animals and 73% of Finns believe in European legislation which promotes the welfare of farmed animals in terms of the conditions under which they are kept (*ibid.* 56, 60). These numbers are, again, the highest in the EU-25. They can of course be positively interpreted in terms of high awareness and well-informed citizens as has been done in the Eurobarometer survey report. However, we think that it is rather unrealistic to expect that three out of four Finnish people have really examined the European legal framework in this domain. Therefore, these survey results can better be understood in terms of policy-generated trust, which perhaps can also be thought as a sort of "carefree trust".

The notion of the carefree trust in animal welfare is supported also by the survey results (*ibid.* 64-65) on animal welfare/protection in one's own country. Finland had clearly the largest proportion of respondents (57 %) of all EU-25 countries stating that animal welfare is given enough importance in the country's food and agricultural policy – and the other way around, the lowest proportion (40 %) thinking that not enough importance is given to animal welfare.

Taken together, the results from the EU25 survey raise really interesting questions on trust, knowledge and the politicisation of the animal welfare issue in Finland. Finnish people seem to think that animal welfare is adequately accounted for in their own country. On the one

hand, this may be considered logical as, in general terms, Finnish consumers still have a rather strong contact to farming due to the late urbanisation of the society. Some urban people still have relatives working in agriculture, and it is also typical to have a summer cottage in the countryside, for instance. Due to this strong countryside connection, the Finns may have a high knowledge on the rural activities. On the other hand, the Finnish livestock sector has gone through a strong structural change and, therefore, the question of “factory farming” has become recently a strong issue in the public discussion. At the same time, consumers really are increasingly distanced from food production and the trust has to be placed more and more in the food industry. This suggests that in addition to trust, we may also think the case of food and animal welfare with other terms such as dependency and lack of power, in particular.

5.DISCUSSION

In late modern societies, there is critical reflexivity about food production methods and changing patterns of food consumption. Animal welfare is a highly politicised issue having some similarities with the rise of environmental concern. However, as the gap between food production and consumption is clearly growing, a main difference follows: unlike environmental problems in the industrialised society, the problems of farm animals can increasingly be out of sight in the industrialised agriculture.

This paper has discussed social changes and developments and asked whether they are leading to the greening of food consumption, particularly in the form of lowering meat consumption. We found that the range of interest in the Finnish food industry has broadened, which obviously reflects changes taken place in the whole society. It was also found that, not surprisingly, in the European context there are no simple connection between economic development and meat consumption. In Finland, the total meat consumption is levelling off but it is not decreasing yet. Moreover, it was found that Finnish citizens tend to express very low concern on animal welfare and very high levels of trust towards the conventional livestock production. In the comparison of the EU-25 countries, the perception of the welfare of cows and pigs is the most positive in Finland. Also the trust in the existence of EU-wide animal welfare legislation is the highest. The Finns believe strongly that animal welfare is given the right level of importance in their own country’s agricultural policy.

Since we are going to explore with empirical data how citizen-consumers (indeed, there are many types of them) see animal-farming practices and what kinds of cultural meanings they associate with farm-animal welfare, we find the low concern for animal welfare as a stimulating starting point in Finland. Likewise, the high trust to institutions and legislation raises interesting questions on the politicisation of food consumption, various positions and

identities of the citizen-consumer and on the social institutions that may be required to facilitate more sustainable choices. A further aim is to investigate the opportunities the citizen-consumers have in different situations to influence farm-animal welfare in their everyday contexts.

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