



Dynamics of asymmetric conflict: The case of the German Milk Conflict



Jan Alpmann^{a,*}, Vera Bitsch^b

^a Technical University of Munich, Chair Group Economics of Horticulture and Landscaping, Alte Akademie 16, 85354 Freising, Germany

^b Technical University of Munich, Chair Economics of Horticulture and Landscaping, Alte Akademie 16, 85354 Freising, Germany

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ABSTRACT

The German Milk Conflict developed when an emerging farmer association challenged the large incumbent in the wake of an insufficiently communicated policy change, abolition of the milk quota. The organizations represent opposing sides of a common policy debate, market liberalization versus regulation. The study analyzed the patterns between the two organizations and proposed a grounded theory of asymmetric conflict. Due to the elevated level of emotions during the conflict, the study used a qualitative research approach based on 34 in-depth interviews. The analysis uncovered the interlocking patterns of simplification and emotionalization by the smaller association and rationalizing by the larger association. Results indicate how an active opponent can use policy changes to its advantage and how to prevent such a development. Recommendations based on the grounded theory developed, such as implementing suitable communication strategies, are transferable to a variety of changes and conflict situations in complex environments, such as the food and agricultural sector.

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1. Introduction

The agricultural sector is subject to frequent policy changes, and a majority of farmers in the European Union (EU) depend on subsidies and therefore on the design of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The combination of financial dependency, deep-rooted family traditions, and an aspiring association aiming to acquire more influence on political decision-making led to the Milk Conflict. The present study addresses the asymmetric, emotionalized conflict situation during the German Milk Conflict. The Milk Conflict resulted from a reform of the EU's agricultural policy, specifically abolition of the dairy milk quota. Reasons for the abolition included the failure to achieve stable producer prices and to halt structural change (BMEL, 2015a). The dynamics of the Milk Conflict were closely linked with the ongoing structural change in the dairy industry. Feindt (2010: 255) pointed out that of the agricultural conflicts of the 21st century in Europe, the Milk Conflict received prominent public attention. Characteristics of the agricultural sector and farming community must be considered to understand the Milk Conflict. Fassnacht et al. (2010: 84) described the agricultural sector as being shaped by the coexistence of emotionality (family) and rationality (business).

Other examples of emotionalized policy-related debates in the food sector include the impact of the abolition of biofuel policies

on agricultural price levels and price variability (e.g., Enciso et al., 2016), environmental savings (reduced carbon footprint) due to policy changes (e.g., Cerutti et al., 2016), the effect of trade policies on less-favored areas (e.g., Oskam et al., 2004), and sources of food price instability (e.g., Byerlee et al., 2006). In all these fields, different opinions come into conflict and have to be negotiated. According to Mockshell and Birner (2015), strong positive self-perception and, in contrast, negative representation of others prevent productive policy dialog. Further, they emphasized the necessity of paying attention to policy beliefs in agricultural policy making.

The milk quota was a regulatory instrument for milk delivery from dairy farmers to creameries, which had been in effect since 1984. As part of the CAP reform, the EU set the end of the quota for April 1, 2015. From dairy farmers' perspective, it was a marketing guarantee of their allocated quota, important because EU farmers' welfare depends largely on regulations (Boulanger and Philippidis, 2015). At the same time, market distortions arising from policy interventions have been the subject of discussion both in Europe and elsewhere worldwide. A recent example is Pieters and Swinnen's (2016) analysis of government interventions during price spikes. Despite the opportunity that policy changes provide for organizational repositioning and questioning of existing structures, analyses of political movements in the context of policy reform within the agricultural sector are limited. Dervillé and Allaire's (2014) analysis of farmers' collective action to mitigate the effects of market liberalization is an exception.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: jan.alpmann@tum.de (J. Alpmann), bitsch@tum.de (V. Bitsch).

Several authors have identified the CAP reform as a source of divergence and polarization. Hansen and Herrmann (2012) found that CAP transfer payments contributed to convergence at the farm level. Accordingly, CAP reform led to divergence in farm receipts. Lobely and Butler (2010) observed that CAP reform resulted in increasing polarization between large and small farms. Market liberalization benefits larger, expanding farms and exerts pressure on smaller ones. As farmers' interests with respect to these developments vary widely, the example of the GFA shows the difficulties that a mainstream representative for a professional group experiences when providing a comprehensive approach. A subgroup of farmers disadvantaged by market liberalization sought alternatives and welcomed an emerging organization that supported their position. The situation presented an opportunity for a relatively new organization, the FDFA, to gain members and influence political decision-making. The milk price was an essential factor in the level of support for the FDFA. One year before the milk-delivery strike, the producer price had risen rapidly, up to a peak of 40 cents/l in October 2007 (Wocken et al., 2008: 36). In early 2008, the milk price dropped by 15 cents while production costs increased. Price negotiations in the spring of 2008 between creameries and food retailers resulted in another price decrease (Jasper, 2009: 24). Farmers reacted with protests and a delivery strike in 2008. The Federal Dairy Farmers' Association (FDFA) challenged the German Farmers' Association (GFA), and dissatisfied dairy farmers joined the FDFA. A minimum milk price was one of the FDFA's major demands.

The GFA, the largest farmer association in Germany with about 300,000 farmers (DBV), emerged from regional associations in 1946. In 1948, the GFA established itself as the first "uniform, free, and self-determined" professional interest group of farmers on the federal level (Landvolk). Rooted in German romanticism, the GFA's mission focused on securing the survival of family farms (Pfeffer, 1989: 60). In the post-war period, the GFA gained political influence by claiming to be the legitimate representative of all German farmers (Pfeffer, 1989: 67). Thereafter the GFA served as a platform for the preservation of family farms. Independent local initiatives subsequently began questioning the GFA's status as the only representative of German farmers (Pfeffer, 1989: 67). Heinze and Mayntz (1992: 73) had emphasized support of large farms and lack of internal democracy as major complaints directed at the GFA. Critique of the GFA during the Milk Conflict included its close ties to the food industry, lack of credibility, insufficient communication between association officials and members, and the lack of a concept for the time after the quota. Steinbach (2009: 43) further identified lack of support for FDFA demands, support for the abolition of the milk quota, conflict of interest due to close contacts with creameries and the milk processing industry, and lack of representation for dairy farmers' interests as major complaints of dissatisfied dairy farmers.

Whereas the GFA represents all farmers of all specializations, the FDFA focuses on dairy farmers. Compared to the GFA, the FDFA is a relatively young association founded in 1998 by interest groups from different regions of Germany (BDM). FDFA North was founded in 2004 and merged with the national FDFA in 2006. According to the FDFA homepage in 2012, the association had 30,000 members. However, the FDFA's spokesman recently revised the estimate to 20,000 members (Deter, 2014). The FDFA's membership numbers surged before and during the Milk Conflict. Niesyto (2006: 11) emphasized collective identity as a central aspect of conflict and protest movements in mobilizing and engaging members. Spiller and Theuvsen (2009: 225) showed that FDFA communications during the Milk Conflict were campaign-oriented aimed at gaining high media attention and determining the public opinion. The FDFA increasingly dominated the discussion of milk market policy. Boehm and Schulze (2010: 202) demonstrated high

media coverage of the FDFA relative to the GFA during the Milk Conflict.

In the context of the planned abolition of the milk quota, many dairy farmers lost confidence in the GFA as their representative because of its support for the policy reform. Before the Milk Conflict, the GFA was the opinion leader without any truly competing association. Most of German agriculture is characterized by individual ownership, farmers in business as sole proprietors or with their families. Farm sizes in the north differ from those in the south. In fiscal year 2014/15, the average herd size in Bavaria was 25.4 dairy cows versus 18.1 dairy cows in Baden-Württemberg. The average herd size in the northern state of Schleswig-Holstein was 42.6 dairy cows (BMEL, 2015b). The conflict was especially intense in southern Germany due to its small-scale dairy farming (Kleinhanss et al., 2010: 3). The main conflict events occurred in 2007 through 2009, with the milk delivery strike in 2008 as a culmination point. Conflict events also included blockades of streets and creameries, and public milk obliterations. The FDFA initiated the milk strike as a strike of independent producers—a new phenomenon in Germany (Boehm and Schulze, 2010: 188). The FDFA conducted an internal strike vote in April 2008, which resulted in 88% of the votes supporting the strike (Jasper, 2009: 24). The milk strike started on May 27, 2008 and lasted 10 days (Steinbach, 2009: 32). Its initial event was an organized protest involving 9000 farmers near the Weihenstephan creamery in Freising/Bavaria (Jasper, 2009: 25). Further culmination points of the conflict were a hunger strike by female farmers in front of the German Chancellery in Berlin (Spiller and Theuvsen, 2009) and the so-called "Haberfeldtreiben," during which a corn dolly was burned near the house of the GFA president (top agrar, 2008).

The objective of the study is to analyze the conflict patterns exhibited by the two associations involved. The study focuses on how the interlocking conflict strategies of the FDFA and GFA led to intense emotionalization and escalation during the Milk Conflict. The study furthermore aims to develop a grounded theory of asymmetric conflict patterns based on the Milk Conflict. The analysis shows the impact that abolition of the milk quota, a food policy change, had on the two associations' conflict behavior and on their standing in the political decision-making process. The grounded theory developed in the present study paves the way for future conflict prevention approaches during similar emotionally charged conflicts. In addition, the study provides insights into how insufficiently communicated policy changes can impact association structures thereby affecting future political opinion formation.

The conflict pattern between the GFA and the FDFA resembles a David-Goliath constellation. David-Goliath conflict entails a significant size difference between the parties involved (Mitchell, 1991). David-Goliath constellations are characterized by high media exposure aimed at shaping public perception and policy makers' opinions through public pressure (Bakir, 2006: 67). The strength of Goliath organizations lies in focusing on well-known territory and presenting factual arguments on expert level. Goliath organizations' initial position within conflicts are therefore often difficult because the strength cannot be exploited in emotionally framed communication. Goliath organizations' highest priority is to decelerate emotionalization and bring the discussion to a factual level. As conflicts develop, they aim to overcome passivity and reactivity, taking an active role as information source to influence public perception (Guetttersberger, 2012). Ahmad (2010: 54) listed tactics and measures reducing David organizations' chances for a successful challenge, in particular, variation of routine and becoming less predictable. The strength of David organizations is the underlying emotionality in conflict situations. The objective of David organizations is therefore to further emotionalize conflicts. A common con-

flict tactic is to emphasize potential negative impacts of Goliath organizations' plans. David organizations need public support to compensate for their size disadvantage. In the role of challenger, David organizations benefit from the public's tendency to support the smaller opponent and to associate "David" with positive intentions (Guetttersberger, 2012: 113–114). Dunne et al. (2006: 184) summarized that smaller challengers often can dominate conflicts because Goliath organizations are unprepared and locked into a particular kind of reactive behavior. In this context, Ahmad (2010: 47) identified selection of place and timing of the challenge as advantages for the initiating conflict party.

2. Methods

The study applies a qualitative research approach, specifically Grounded Theory by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The goal is to develop theory in the social sciences based on empirical research through the interaction between data collection and theory development. Glaser and Strauss emphasized that such theories have to fit the empirical situation and should be understandable by laypersons and field experts (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 1). The process of developing Grounded Theory is described as follows. "In discovering theory, one generates conceptual categories or their properties from evidence, then the evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 23).

In view of the overall research procedure, Bitsch (2005: 77) subdivided the process of developing a grounded theory into five recursive steps, "[...] deciding on a research problem, framing the research question, data collection, data coding and analysis, and theory development." Glaser and Strauss (1967: 105–113) highlighted the method of constant comparison as fundamental to the analytical approach. The method consists of comparing incidents, integrating categories, delimiting the theory, and then writing the theory. As part of this process, primary data such as interview statements are transformed through codes and categories into theoretical concepts, and further expanded into theories grounded in empirical data. The method of constant comparison forms the basis for generating the abstract categories and their properties from which the theory emerges. Individual research participants' perspectives are thus aggregated into more abstract concepts based on general patterns, shaping the core of the theory developed. Theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation are additional key concepts necessary for understanding Grounded Theory. Theoretical sampling describes the process of data collection during which researchers decide which data to collect to further develop the theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 45). Bitsch (2005: 77–79) emphasized that the systematic variation of conditions is essential, and the process has to be repeated iteratively throughout the research process. Theoretical saturation describes the phase in which additional data does not contribute to further category development and therefore does not advance the theory. Saturation can be identified by a declining number of new codes developed and repeating instances of primary data. Theoretical saturation therefore serves to determine the necessary amount of data collection (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 45–46).

The study is based on 34 in-depth interviews lasting on average between 1.5 and 2 h. The first author personally conducted face-to-face interviews between January 2011 and January 2013, after the termination of milk strike but before abolition of the milk quota. The study was conducted in the southern German states of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, which were the main conflict regions. Interview topics focused on the conflict pattern of the Milk Conflict, how actions of the organizations involved were perceived, and the interviewees' related decision-making processes. Inter-

views were conducted with dairy farmers and, after the initial analysis, with experts from the associations involved in the conflict, relevant politicians, agricultural experts, dairy sector experts, as well as conflict experts (Table 1).

Interviewees from the dairy farmer group were recruited based on suggestions of farmers and experts as well as based on newspaper articles in which they were mentioned. Politicians and experts were identified through Internet searches for their fields of competence, positions, and institutional affiliations. The reason for including only two conflict experts is the relatively small number of conflicts experts highly knowledgeable about the agricultural sector and the Milk Conflict. It should be noted that several of the local politicians interviewed were also part-time farmers and were therefore are classified as dairy farmers. Furthermore, several politicians declined the interview request. They stated the emotionalized conflict and a aversion to restart the discussion as reasons.

A modified snowball sampling procedure was applied whereby interviewees were asked to suggest further interviewees. The former were asked to name people with completely different points of view than their own. Due to the emotionalized conflict and the level of involvement of many interviewees, the interviews were conducted in an open manner based on an interview guide. The interview guide differed depending on the particular interviewee group. Initial topics included general information, such as association membership, farm size, age, and education, and interviewees' perceptions of the Milk Conflict, for example, background, pattern, personal position, and positioning of involved associations. After providing their basic evaluation of the conflict situation, interviewees were asked about their opinion formation during the Milk Conflict and the observed actions of the associations involved, as well as their expectations regarding the associations. Further topics included the conflict aftermath and an assessment of the further development of the associations.

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim afterward, adjusting the local dialects of many interviewees to more standard German. Because of the large number of interviews, voice inflections and breaks, laughter and hesitations were not taken into consideration. F4 transcription software was used to facilitate the transcription process. Overall, the transcripts amounted to over 800 pages of interview text to be analyzed.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software (version 7.0). The software supports the researchers' development of the code system and serves as a repository for codes developed and attached memos, and how they relate to each other and linked interview statements. Memos are an important part of the analysis process and serve to support researchers' theoretical thinking and idea structuring. Lempert (2007: 245), for example, emphasized their conceptual importance by pointing out, "[m]emos are not intended to describe the social

Table 1
Overview of interviewee groups.

Interviewee groups	Number (n = 34)
Dairy farmers	Farmers, farmer spouses, junior farmers 12
Agricultural experts	Experts of the agricultural sector, chief editors 5
Dairy experts	Dairy market experts and creamery CEOs 4
Association experts	GFA and FDFA 9
Conflict experts	Experts on conflict and change management 2
Politicians	Local politicians in agriculture and environment 2

worlds of the researcher's data, instead, they conceptualize the data in narrative form."

The conceptual analysis began with the repeated reading of each interview transcript, and linking codes with interview statements (Fig. 1). The early phase of this procedure is called open coding, meaning that coding is broad and open during early analysis. The coding becomes more specific as analysis progresses. During analysis, new codes can be added, other codes deleted or renamed, and existing codes merged (Friese, 2012: 63–78). Codes are aggregated into categories and the researchers analyze the relationships among categories and individual codes. Codes can be differentiated into three levels: (1) code families as superior codes, which condense a number of codes and constitute the preliminary stages of categories; (2) normal codes, which provide the basis for code families; and (3) subcodes, which serve to illustrate a complex situation in detail. The foundation of all types of codes are the primary data. The result of the coding process is represented through categories with a consistent definition.

The analysis process resembles a funnel, consolidating the large amount of data collected into theoretical categories as the basis for developing the grounded theory of the research topic. The analysis process is recursive to include all data in the final code system. Transcripts are re-coded multiple times to ensure a systematic process of data analysis. Throughout the progress towards the final code system, categories, and development of the grounded theory, the researchers' reflection and theoretical thinking becomes more refined.

The coding table illustrates the composition of the categories developed for the field "FDFA conflict behavior" as an example of the process of data analysis (Table 2). The definition of each category clarifies its context and the manifestation of the category identified. The process of recursive advancement from codes and subcodes through code families and finally to categories reveals patterns in the data, which are then represented in the emerging grounded theory. For the sake of clarity, the coding table omits subcodes and examples of quotes, and displays only code families with selected examples of codes associated. Some of the interview quotes associated with these families describe the category and its definition particularly well, and are therefore included in the result section as examples. These quotes serve to illustrate the connection between the abstract categories and the resulting grounded theory and their basis in the interviews.

3. Results: conflict dynamics during the German Milk Conflict

The German Milk Conflict was shaped by the associations involved. The size and position disparities between the GFA and the FDFA are consistent with a David-Goliath constellation. Each organizations' conflict pattern is first presented separately based on the categories developed during analysis of the in-depth interviews. Both patterns are then consolidated and their interlocking nature analyzed taking into account the time factor and leading to the development of a grounded theory of asymmetric conflict.

3.1. The FDFA's conflict pattern

Being the smaller David organization, the FDFA adopted the role of the challenger during the Milk Conflict. The FDFA's conflict actions were designed to garner attention and emotionalize dairy farmers, seizing the opportunity to question the GFA in the course of the policy debate. The analysis was based on the category "conflict pattern FDFA" consisting of 136 codes and all associated interview statements. It revealed a conflict pattern with four phases: questioning, simplifying, emotionalizing, and mobilizing (Fig. 2).

3.1.1. Questioning

"Against the backdrop of a large, a bit arrogant association, it [the FDFA] is basically a kind of catalyst [...], has something of an enzyme, or if you throw an aspirin into the water, then it is sizzling first. It bubbled, it first stirred up, and it has contributed to the self-examination of the [G]FA".

[Agricultural Expert 1]

The FDFA was a relatively new association lacking established traditions. The emerging association presented itself as an active player fighting for dairy farmer interests, and challenging the GFA and its dominance. The FDFA thereby challenged the GFA's position as the only representative of German farmers and demanded more pluralistic opinion formation from policy makers. Challenge points against the GFA included the GFA's support for the abolition of the milk quota, increasing distrust in the GFA association, its close ties to the food industry, and its neglect of dairy farmers. In contrast, the FDFA promoted continuation of the milk quota and thus represented the mood of dairy farmers accustomed to the quota system. In this context, political opinion formation was called into question and the FDFA claimed that more organizations should be involved. To expand influence, the FDFA collaborated with environmental and consumer groups to garner support for its demands and initiate a public debate on dairy farmers' income situation.

3.1.2. Simplifying

"[...] to keep the world manageable. It is not unappealing at first glance, but it is not realistic".

[Agricultural Expert 1]

Simplification of a complex topic was an essential part of the FDFA's approach during the Milk Conflict. Implementation was based on simple and clear demands (e.g., 43 cents/kg minimum price, cost recovery for small farms). Despite the assessment by the GFA, agricultural experts, and politicians that the FDFA's demands were unrealistic, the FDFA insisted and persuaded its members that with sufficient commitment and pressure their demands were achievable. Concerning the criticism of infeasibility, the FDFA suggested to "first try before forming an opinion." Politicians in particular were blamed for presenting facts in an incomprehensible manner. The FDFA displayed its essential demands on large signs and banners in prominent places, and dur-

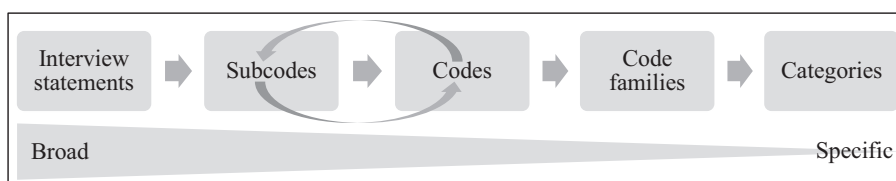


Fig. 1. Research process from interview statements to categories.

Table 2
Coding table for “FDFA conflict behavior”.

Categories	Definition	Code families with selected example codes
Questioning	Aspects of the FDFA's approach to questioning the European Union's policy change and also questioning the GFA's policy	Current developments Agricultural policy Strike survey GFA's activities targeted Market liberalization
Simplifying	Range of topics and claims the FDFA utilized to convince dairy farmers that their economic problems can be solved with the FDFA's vision (sufficient income independent of farm size). The majority are based on the issues of the milk market and income distribution	Market mechanism/globalization Flexible quantity milk control Adjustment of supply and demand Retention of the milk quota Milk price <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unfair producer prices • Minimum price of 40 cents Small rural structures as goal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growth limit reached • Disadvantaged regions • Socially compatible production
Emotionalizing	Conflict actions aim at emotionalizing the conflict, gaining new members, and increasing media awareness of FDFA's claims. Instruments used to heat up the debate and cause emotional reactions and feelings	David versus Goliath comparisons <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict personification (GFA) • Arrogant GFA president • Responsible for low milk prices • Industry concentration Instruments/Methods <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional images • Initiation of a mass movement • Spread FDFA vision • Dissatisfaction and fears
Mobilizing	Association activities intended to mobilize already emotionalized members and increase pressure on other entities (e.g., politicians, GFA officials, media) to support the FDFA's claims. Also serves to increase pressure on previously passive farmers to support the FDFA. Supporting FDFA farmers who exert pressure on other farmers	Feeling of community Pressure for a milk delivery strike Addressing members personally <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on active dairy farmers • Integration of female farmers • Call for solidarity • Focus on members Encouraging withdrawal from the GFA <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deduct the FDFA membership fee from the GFA membership fee • Prepared letter of resignation Communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protests, talks, roundtables • Multiple communication channels • Publicly visible signs, banners

ing events and demonstrations. The FDFA targeted small farms with few growth opportunities and a strong interest in keeping the quota.

3.1.3. Emotionalizing

“[...] I believe that everything happened on the emotional level. The whole discussion consists of 20% factual basis and 80% emotions [...]”.

[Policy Expert 1]

One of the FDFA's primary conflict strategies was to prevent objective discussion. For this purpose, the FDFA's campaign targeted many dairy farmers' fear of change. Further aspects were the ongoing structural change and related fears regarding farm survival and follow-up problems. The FDFA's line of argument was predicated on the vision of sustaining small-scale milk production by maintaining the milk quota system and a minimum milk price. The FDFA promoted itself as the association for active dairy farmers and expressed its point of view with the statement “We have the power” (Dairy Farmer 12). The idea behind this statement was that the producers should determine the price and act confidently in the value chain.

The FDFA tried to pinpoint other organizations and individuals as antagonists of active dairy farmers, namely the GFA, the Associ-

ation of the German Dairy Industry, creameries, and politicians. For instance, the GFA's connections with the food industry were listed as negative influences. FDFA representatives described the GFA as too close to the food industry and discredited the GFA president in particular. He was framed as a puppet of the food industry and his dual position as president of the Bavarian Farmer Association and the GFA depicted as non-neutral. In contrast to the GFA president who was portrayed as arrogant and biased, the FDFA president was portrayed as a positive, authentic leader.

3.1.4. Mobilizing

“And whenever something is impending, there is a pied piper taking care of the dissatisfied, the small, and the poor, those with poor equity, and in the middle of a structural change process, especially in Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg. And that is where the FDFA movement emerged [...]”.

[Association Expert 4, Association of the German Dairy Industry]

Mobilizing during the milk delivery strike included influencing the opinions of undecided dairy farmers through regular visits by FDFA activists. The appeal to solidarity between colleagues was promoted in particular. Many interviewees also reported pressure and occasional threats of consequences, such as termination of

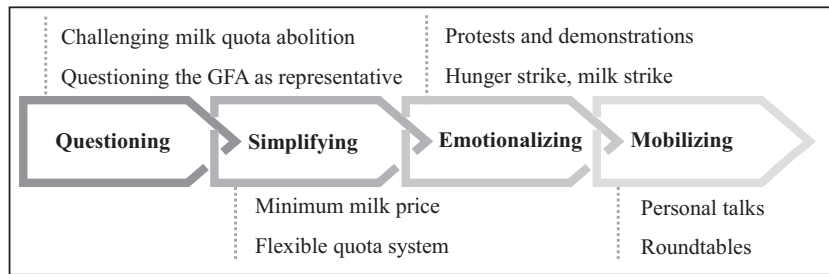


Fig. 2. The FDFA's conflict pattern during the course of the Milk Conflict.

supply relationships. To increase its membership numbers, the FDFA tried to convince farmers to cancel their GFA memberships. For instance, the FDFA organized mass resignations of GFA members using exit templates and lists of resignations. With these actions, the FDFA pursued multiple objectives, namely negative media reports and weakening of the GFA, increasing its own membership numbers, garnering public attention, and increasing the pressure to accept FDFA demands.

During the course of the Milk Conflict, the FDFA managed to communicate very quickly, coupling communication intensity with the milk price development. FDFA members organized further events included roundtables, nightly meetings, and larger events in convention halls, especially before and during the milk delivery strike. The involvement of female farmers and rural women was an essential part of the FDFA's communication and mobilization. Women were actively involved in the discussions and events thereby expanding the FDFA's capacity and acting as multipliers for the FDFA's vision. The objective of the FDFA was to keep the dynamic of the conflict on a high level and prevent a development towards more factual discussion. The exceptional commitment of its members enabled the FDFA to manage this heavy workload during the Milk Conflict.

3.2. The GFA's conflict pattern

The larger Goliath association, the GFA, was rather passive, aiming to keep its standing and rationalize the discussion. The analysis was based on the category "conflict pattern GFA," consisting of over 70 codes and all associated interview statements. The analysis revealed the following four phases: underestimating, rationalizing, repositioning, and differentiating (Fig. 3).

3.2.1. Underestimating

"The Farmers' Association has been caught on the wrong foot in the beginning of the development. I think, the GFA did not understand what was going on [...]."

[Dairy Expert 3]

The GFA's passivity characterized first conflict phase. The GFA initially ignored the FDFA as a minor association and dismissed its demands as unrealistic. The mobilization potential of the FDFA was underestimated, resulting in the first signs of conflict escalation were not noticed or ignored. Early FDFA actions included small streets protests, the FDFA internal strike vote to initiate a milk strike, and a rising number of complaints about the GFA's support for the abolition of the milk quota. According to the experts interviewed, had the GFA operated more proactively during this phase, a rational discussion based on market data might have been possible. Instead, the GFA criticized the potential milk delivery strike as illegal. Different GFA officials emphasized that they would not support members' delivery contract violations.

3.2.2. Rationalizing

"[...] we tried to address the head. The FDFA addressed the gut feelings, and they were more successful by addressing the gut feelings [...]."

[Dairy Expert 3]

Its inexperience with conflict communication became evident after the GFA realized the seriousness of the developing conflict. The conflict's increasing intensity strained the association, which was struggling to communicate its sympathy with the dairy farmers' situation. As a result, the GFA did not initially react to actions initiated by the FDFA, hoping for a quick end. Interviewed GFA officials explained the lack of reaction by pointing out that dealing with emotions was not a core competency of the fact-oriented GFA. Their representatives were trained to argue based on facts and economic developments, not based on fears. The GFA was in a dilemma, with respect to its position as a prestigious association known for factual communication and the attractiveness of emotional stance on the other side. The association responded to FDFA demands on a factual level with evidence-based statements. But according to the majority of interviewees, the arguments got lost in the emotional debate. Further, the GFA struggled to communicate its time-intensive political background work and the relevance of that type of work for farmers.

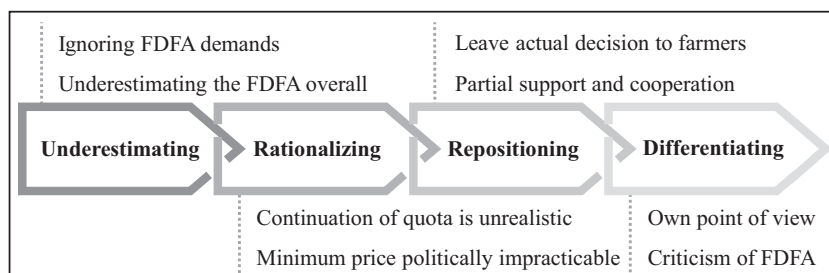


Fig. 3. The GFA's conflict pattern during the course of the Milk Conflict.

3.2.3. Repositioning

“The GFA has not called for a strike, because we have not considered this as a measure of an entrepreneur”.

[Association Expert 6, GFA]

The milk delivery strike initiated by the FDFA initially surprised the GFA, which announced that it would not support this form of protest. This position was in part attributable to the broad range of interests within in the GFA, which produced a slow reaction culminating in an unfavorable position vis-à-vis its smaller, more nimble opponent. The GFA stated that a strike is not an entrepreneurial activity. FDFA members criticized this reaction as displaying an unwillingness to compromise.

3.2.3.1. Repositioning 1: leave actual decision to farmers.

“There was no unified position. It was not a stringent position”.

[Association Expert 4, Association of the German Dairy Industry]

Internal pressure by members and external pressure from the FDFA caused several local chapters of the GFA opted for temporary strike assistance at the local level. Deviation from the basic strategy was justified by the need to react to the conflict's intense emotionalization. GFA presidents in the states of Hesse and Saxony reduced their own farms' milk deliveries as an act of solidarity with striking farmers. The GFA suggested that members decide individually whether to participate in the milk strike or continue milk delivery. This was communicated, for example, through a letter by the president stating that strike participation is a personal decision for every entrepreneur. The letter led to discontent among striking farmers as well as those not participating in the milk strike. Nonparticipating farmers sensed a lack of support from the GFA. Participating farmers were unhappy because of the so-called GFA attitude of refusal during the conflict.

3.2.3.2. Repositioning 2: partial support and cooperation.

“Whether it has always been done right, I do not know, but as I said there were these different approaches in the regions due to different regional constellations [...]”.

[Agricultural Expert 2]

“Overall they [the GFA] did not participate. They actually went to negotiate, where actually we should have sat, the FDFA. They jumped on the bandwagon at the last moment”.

[Association Expert 2, FDFA]

The conflict's emotionalized dynamics and pressure from many farmers to support FDFA's claims prompted the GFA to initiate individual actions, such as demonstrations in front of food retailers during the further course of the conflict. According to the experts interviewed, this compromise was motivated by fear of division within the association and aimed at easing public pressure on the GFA. Overall, the GFA did not pursue a clear line action but attempted instead to accommodate the varied opinions of farmers. During this phase, the GFA began shifting from confrontational to cooperative conflict behavior regarding the FDFA. The GFA had to respond to recurring allegations that it sought to benefit from the FDFA movement. Near the end of the Milk Conflict, when conflict intensity was at its peak, the FDFA tried to achieve an agreement with politicians and food retailers to end the delivery strike. Through the initiative of the GFA president, discussions with retailers were conducted that resulted in a compromise with a large retailer to raise milk and butter prices. After the agreement, the FDFA organized a final rally in the German capital, Berlin, to

end the strike. Many experts emphasized that the agreement would hardly have been possible without the GFA president's network.

3.2.4. Differentiating

“[...] from my point of view the FDFA made a mistake. To issue an ultimatum without an exit option is a bad model”.

[Conflict Expert 1]

During the course of the conflict, the GFA criticized the FDFA for its cooperation with consumer-oriented organizations such as the Friends of the Earth Germany, and Working Group of Peasant Farmers. GFA officials referred to the FDFA president with exaggerated irony as the “Messiah.” After the end of the Milk Conflict, the GFA pointed out that its statements during the Milk Conflict were correct. The GFA also communicated that the difficult time during the milk strike strengthened the GFA, and that there is no real alternative. From GFA's point of view, its decision to not work with emotional statements and instead communicate openly regarding the quota abolition was correct. The GFA wanted to present a realistic picture of the future. It also maintained that dairy farmers must be prepared to act entrepreneurially and that it will continue to not support illegal actions. As the main reason for the temporary strike advocacy of some local chapters, GFA officials mentioned the pressure on members and its presidents. Furthermore, they emphasized the negative consequences of the Milk Conflict, ongoing conflicts within communities, and the destruction of food during the milk strike. The GFA blamed the FDFA as the initiator of the conflict dynamics.

3.3. Grounded theory proposed: interlocking milk conflict patterns

The GFA had no choice about whether or not to assume the role of Goliath in the David-Goliath constellation. Its positioning was predetermined by its support and promotion of the policy change. Whereas the FDFA could seize the active role as the challenger, David, thereby enabling it to control the initial time and place of the conflict. The initial-timing advantage persisted throughout the Milk Conflict. The different phases of the action patterns of both associations show the GFA's delayed reactions (Fig. 4).

The Milk Conflict was framed by FDFA demands and its proactive approach. The FDFA initially began questioning abolition of the milk quota and introduction of open-market policies to distinguish itself from the GFA and establish itself as an active conflict opponent. In the next phase, the FDFA focused on simplifying the main issues to emotionalize the affected dairy farmers. The emotionalization process served to prevent the discussion from focusing on facts, and also personalize the conflict. Building on the emotionalization, the FDFA began mobilizing farmers to participate in the milk strike and in protests, and to become members. The FDFA presented itself as the voice of small-scale family farms thereby enabling it to further emphasize its position as the David organization.

The GFA, on the other hand, initially underestimated the conflict potential and allowed the FDFA to promote its demands and shift the discussion to an emotional level. In the emotionalization phase, the GFA tried to rationalize the situation based on facts, which the high level of emotionalization rendered extremely difficult. During the further course of the conflict, the GFA tried to reposition itself in response to the intense emotionality and the pressure on many dairy farmers among its members. Towards the end of the conflict, the GFA started to more clearly differentiate itself from the competing FDFA and criticized the FDFA's conflict actions and demands. Overall, the GFA remained passive and reac-

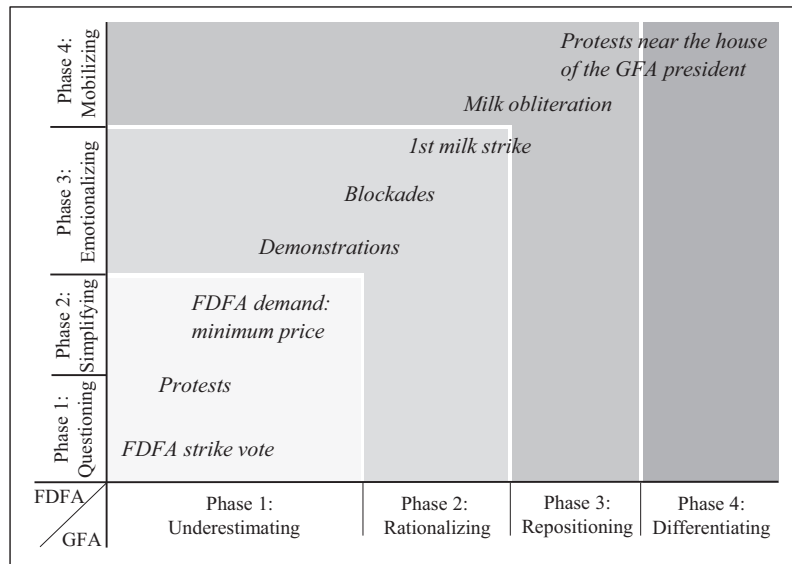


Fig. 4. Interlocking conflict pattern of the Milk Conflict.

tive. In the further course of the conflict, the GFA struggled to overcome this Goliath dilemma and become more proactive.

The conflict emotionalization played a key role during its development. The FDFA exploited fears and compassion as well as a sense of justice. The objective was to create a movement and convince people to support its position. The FDFA made sure to evoke fears and solidarity to accomplish high mobilization among its members and garner broad media coverage. Critical success factors for the FDFA included initiation of the milk delivery strike, the coupling of communication actions to price developments, and the involvement of previously uninvolved groups, such as farmers' spouses.

The GFA's delayed reactions contributed to the FDFA's success in accomplishing a high level of conflict emotionalization. The FDFA was able to use the strengths of a David organization as an opportunity to challenge the more powerful Goliath organization. The phase shift at the beginning of the conflict led to delayed reactions from the GFA throughout the conflict and the continued advantage of the FDFA. While the GFA was still in phase 1, the FDFA was already at the end of phase 2 and on the way to phase 3. At the beginning of the conflict, the need to intervene seemed relatively small from GFA's point of view. Accordingly, the GFA remained in phase 1. In contrast, the FDFA used its chance to raise the emotionalization level and frame the conflict. As a consequence, the GFA subsequently had difficulties to transit to phase 2, the rationalization phase, which might have been easier at an earlier point. The GFA found itself in a reactive position as a result. Insight into the need for active conflict actions was present, but was barely possible due to the already advanced state of conflict emotionalization. During phase 3, the GFA was already in crisis with the consequence that its ability to change was low and its members also perceived it as inflexible. In contrast, the FDFA was able to further emotionalize (phase 3) and mobilize (phase 4) affected farmers. This resulted in the GFA's further loss of power, and only after the conflict did it regain the ability to differentiate (phase 4) itself from the FDFA and recover its status.

4. Discussion

The Milk Conflict exemplifies an encounter of distinct approaches to economic policy. The FDFA supported closely regulated and protected agriculture. In contrast, the GFA supported a

liberal, market-oriented policy. The Milk Conflict was an example from the agricultural sector, which is characterized by subsidies and frequent policy changes and is thus prone to emotional policy debate. Effects of the emotionalized conflict are still noticeable through discontinued cooperations, such as joint input procurement, and ceased communal activities, such as clubs and educational events. Mistrust and loss of face drove these developments and they can be traced back to actions undertaken during the Milk Conflict.

Emotionalization played a major role in mobilizing supporters. Recurring instruments in the Milk Conflict were simplification (slogans, symbols, and visualizations) and personification. The FDFA in particular strove for emotionalization, which improved its position during the asymmetric conflict. The conflict actions of the FDFA were based on issues that triggered fears, specifically fear of change, existential fear, and fear of the future. The grounded theory proposed shows how the level of conflict emotionalization depended on the extent of passivity of the GFA. If the larger conflict opponent had been proactive and able to rationalize the conflict at an earlier point, then the emotionalization, and therefore the mobilization of supporters and the media would have been much more difficult.

Overall, the FDFA's conflict pattern highlights how that association tried to gain new members and profit from the policy change, and the interlocking conflict pattern of the GFA provides indications about how to defend against such actions. In this context, the study uncovered a conflict pattern that can be transferred to other situations where policy changes occur and organizations try to benefit from them in unintended ways. The underlying policy change of the Milk Conflict was the foundation for the temporary success of the FDFA (David). Success factors were the ability to mobilize dissatisfied farmers and garner media attention. Essential for the GFA (Goliath) as the challenged opinion leader would have been early efforts to communicate the policy change and considering differential impacts. The GFA had to defend its position and should have been prepared for the internal differentiation of opinion formation.

The reasons identified for the intense emotionalization of the conflict confirm the results of prior studies in the agricultural sector. Fassnacht et al.'s (2010) insight that farm family businesses are characterized by the coexistence of emotionality and rationality provides the underlying reason for the emotional involvement of

farm families throughout the Milk Conflict. In a study of farmers' decision-making and emotions during the Milk Conflict, [Alpmann and Bitsch \(2015\)](#) distinguished two groups of farmers whose members resigned from the GFA, a convinced group and a pressured group each with different motives. The pressured group reported negative perceptions such as feeling threatened, controlled, or concerned. [Pfeffer \(1989: 62\)](#) mentioned the disagreement of family farm and free market advocates as a "basic value conflict," which was confirmed by the analysis of the Milk Conflict. Also, negative financial aspects of the CAP reform described by [Lobely and Butler \(2010\)](#), which are more difficult to bear for smaller farms, were another driver of emotionality in the Milk Conflict and a basis for the conflict claims of the FDFA.

Conflict actions and behaviors described in the conflict literature were furthermore confirmed through the analysis of the Milk Conflict. [Guetttersberger's \(2012: 113\)](#) conclusion that David organizations aim to dominate public opinion was also confirmed during the German Milk Conflict as the FDFA strove for and achieved broad media coverage using the first mover advantage when initiating the challenge. Aspects of collective identity discussed by [Niesyto \(2006: 11\)](#) were also evident in interview statements, especially those from FDFA supporters. In the interviews, they repeatedly described an exhilarating group spirit, a feeling of community, participants supporting each other, and fighting for the values of the association. Overall, [Guetttersberger's \(2012: 59–60\)](#) analysis outlining characteristics of Goliath organizations, such as factual lines of argument, and reactive and passive conflict behavior, were also identified in the conflict pattern of the GFA during the Milk Conflict. Correspondingly, the FDFA's actions resembled those described in the literature for David organizations as seeking attention and showing the serious nature of the developments. The grounded theory developed identifies additional structures on both sides of the David-Goliath constellation. By introducing the time aspect, and emphasizing the interlocking conflict patterns, the proposed grounded theory of asymmetric conflict exemplifies possible further actions and initiatives.

5. Conclusions

The Milk Conflict represents an insufficiently communicated a policy change. In the present case, the challenging organization, the FDFA, used the communication weakness to establish itself more firmly and to strengthen its position by focusing on and exploiting the feelings of dissatisfied and disadvantaged farmers who opposed policy reform. The analysis also demonstrated the advantages of inclusiveness by expanding target groups—in this case by reaching out to farmers' spouses and others—to build broader support and oppose policy reform. Timing and attention also emerged as critical factors in dealing with conflict.

The David-Goliath framework elaborated with the conflict patterns of the FDFA and GFA is especially useful in complex conflict management contexts, such as the food sector, involving a wide range of external and internal stakeholders with different interests and motivations along the value chain. The proposed grounded theory of asymmetric conflict could be used by smaller David organizations for the continuous assessment of conflict progress. The coordination and planning of conflict actions can thereby be optimized to hinder the Goliath organization's transition into the rationalizing phase. If the smaller organization is able to challenge the larger one with efficient timing and high speed, there is a considerable chance to dominate the conflict development. It is therefore crucial for David organizations to invest in the questioning, simplifying, and emotionalization phases. To be successful, David organizations also need to use surfacing dissatisfaction and fears as opportunities, and to exploit all available venues to win new

supporters. It is essential to draw attention to concerns and look for partners to strengthen one's own position. Further tactics could include bringing up new allegations and requesting official statements to exert time pressure on the Goliath organization.

Goliath organizations can use the theory proposed to classify the conflict level and pending actions, especially to shorten the rationalizing phase. The continuing assessment of a conflict's development allows it to focus on its own organization and necessary next steps to rationalize the conflict situation. Possible actions to shorten the rationalizing phase are timely communication and advancing top management's awareness of the conflict. Furthermore, the implementation of early indicators identifying critical trends, such as polls, complaints, resignations, and media coverage can shorten the underestimation phase. During the rationalizing phase, it is paramount to prevent starting numerous actions without proper planning or considering the long term consequences for the organization. Preferably, the Goliath organization has to anticipate possible challenges to its status in advance and be aware of its own weaknesses, which could be difficult from a position of superiority in size and strength. In addition, it is paramount that Goliath organizations stay vigilant to identify new issues early and address fears of their members or customers (e.g., fear of change, existential fears) from the beginning. Goliath organizations must strive to prevent the limitation of their scope of action caused by a high level of conflict emotionalization, and if emotionalization occurs, to overcome it as soon as possible.

Overall, the findings from the study suggest that policy makers and industry associations should be prepared to communicate planned policy changes to a wide range of target groups, including to farmers with a high workload influenced by diverse competing organizations having varying interests. A timely, clear, and well-structured information strategy for policy changes can reduce insecurity, diminish risks for affected groups, and help prevent claims from interest groups opposing the policy reform from reaching their targets. Such action could also prevent or reduce conflict emotionalization, and reduce the probability of instrumentalization to accomplish its purpose. Recent studies show further application areas and underline the importance for a broad range of international policy changes (e.g., [Sok et al., 2015](#), on voluntary vaccination strategies; [Hansson and Lagerkvist, 2015](#), on the implementation of animal welfare standards).

Building on the findings of the present study, policy makers and organizations representing a large subset of members within the food sector can use the following actions to garner understanding and support during the design and implementation of policy changes: (1) developing and implementing an appropriate communication strategy for all relevant target groups and members; (2) clarifying its position and goals in pursuing the planned policy change; (3) paying attention and reacting to emerging contextual and information gaps between target groups and organizations with varying interests from the beginning. Using these strategies requires sufficient institutional capacity and leadership to deescalate or avoid developing conflict patterns. To deescalate or avoid a conflict, policy makers and industry associations can build on and adapt the following approaches based on the grounded theory proposed. Supporting organizations and associations need to (4) be aware of the aims, target groups, and cooperation partners of emerging competitors, and (5) develop a uniform internal and external communication system to address claims and attacks from other organizations. Policy makers and supporting organizations should both also accelerate communication processes and be present in the main conflict areas (in the present case, in rural areas with extended conflict discussion), as well as classify the conflict actions and patterns according to the proposed frame to decide on suitable defense or action strategies.

The communication surrounding policy reform is a key component of successful implementation, especially in a complex environment, such as the food sector. Communication should use a variety of channels, such as person-to-person, information and communication technologies, and other organizations to address a wide range of target groups. Advocacy groups can target policy changes—particularly those introduced during economically difficult times—to achieve their specific goals by supporting or opposing a planned policy change. In the present case, the FDFA's conflict strategy could be framed as targeted at gaining members, building its standing as an alternative association for dissatisfied farmers, and strengthening its role in the political debate by opposing a widely agreed upon policy reform. In this context, the strength of large established organizations, in the present case the GFA, may depend on their ability to stay flexible and be open to more diverse political opinion formation, inclusiveness, and reaching internal consensus by integrating conflicting interests. If existing organizations are unable to adapt to changing conditions and developing conflicts, then their status as sole representatives or major political lobbying organizations will decline.

On the other hand, conflicts are not necessarily disadvantageous. They can provide an opportunity for questioning entrenched structures and implementing necessary adjustments. If organizations involved can transform the conflict from being destructive into using it constructively, they will benefit from it. The energy associated with the conflict can create an environment conducive to change and foster innovations. Moreover, the intense discussion during the Milk Conflict also constituted an important signal for farmers that their concerns are being heard and taken into account—independent of the outcome. The media coverage symbolized the importance and special significance of food production in society, and provided citizens with insights into the current situation of agricultural production.

Future research could build on and benefit from the grounded theory proposed in the present study to emphasize the positive aspects of a conflict and hinder emotional conflict escalation. Further comparisons of conflict dynamics in the agri-food sector exhibiting the David-Goliath constellation could help expand and evaluate the proposed grounded theory. This would be especially relevant to analyzing the similarities and differences of other asymmetric conflict constellations. Particularly, additional research into policy change contexts in other sectors of the food value chain (e.g., glyphosate application in corn production, use of genetically modified organisms in food production, or animal welfare in livestock farming) could add to or serve to test the theory proposed. In addition, research in different regions, with differing philosophical and political underpinnings and expectations, could serve to expand the grounded theory proposed into varying market environments and cultural contexts.

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