Food ethics and policies

Introduction

Food policy attracts considerable attention in public administration, among consumers, in the media, in food and agricultural research, and even in private organizations. In general, it is recognized that food production, food handling, and food consumption all have considerable impact on a number of issues such as health, economy, culture, and environmental sustainability. The recognition of the central role of food for society, the environment, and human beings has fostered multiple reflections on the role and extent of food policy. In this entry, focus is on:

- What is food policy?
- How is food policy interlinked with other policies?
- Which aims and ethical principles relate to food policy?

Policy and Principles

Considering the nature of food policy, it is reasonable to look into understandings of the last part of the concept, namely, policy. It is worthwhile to note that in English, unlike many other languages, a distinction is made between policy, politics, and polity. In short, polity refers to the political organization or form of a group. Politics refers to activities associated with governance of political questions. Politics as a decision-making process is concerned with the process of policy-making and therefore part of, for instance, power struggles about which policies to be conducted and implemented and of ethical and juridical evaluations of such processes.

When it comes to the concept of policy, most authors agree that the raison d'être of policies is to achieve certain desired outcomes. Policies state aims and goals to be pursued. As most organizations ranging from states to companies to civil society organizations have goals, they also have policies. Policies are hence applied from the macrolevel till the microlevel.

An example from food policy can illustrate this. A common desired outcome of food policy that can be found on all institutional levels from international organizations like the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), and Codex Alimentarius (1979) to local levels like local canteens is that of food safety. The aims of food safety policies are manifold. Most evident is the aim to protect citizens' and consumers' health by avoiding diseases caused by food intake. This goal is also a part of UNs Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Food safety is therefore linked to health, public health, and health policies. However, food safety is also important for consumers' trust in food and the food market and therefore interlinked with industrial and trade policies.

The example makes it clear that a desired outcome of a policy, in this case food safety, may serve different purposes. The case also underlines the interrelatedness of food policy with other policies. In the light of this, it can be debated if food safety should be seen as value in itself, as a value connected to other values, or simply as a tool to reach certain outcomes and aims. The values behind food safety in this case stretch from economic considerations of the functioning of the market to the protection of individuals based on universal human rights which again are based on the ethical idea of the inherent dignity of all human beings.

The example suggests that policies and policy goals ultimately are based on values or principles even though they may not be expressed explicitly. In his famous definition of a political system, David Easton writes that "[A] political system can be designated as those interactions through which values are authoritatively allocated for a society" (Easton 1965, p. 21). Maurice Kogan (1975, p. 55) states that policies are the operational statements of values and statements of prescriptive intent. Oxford Dictionary describes policy as "a course or principle of action adopted or proposed by an organization or individual." To summarize, it can be said that policies:

- State matters of principle (values, moral norms, ethical principles)
- Are prescriptive/guiding and focus on action
- Are authoritative statements

The last point refers to the fact that in order for a policy to be efficiently converted into action, it must be stated

authoritatively. If a policy has no authority or is poorly legitimized, it cannot be expected to be implemented effectively. One way of legitimizing policies is to consider inclusive procedures during the process of policy-making (Röcklinsberg 2006), which belongs to the area of procedural ethics.

Development and Extent of Food Policy

With this understanding of the concept of policy, attention can be turned to food policy. Like any other policy, food policies state matters of principle and focus on prescription and action. This entry addresses the link between food policy and ethics and the question is therefore what are these matters of principle in food policy?

Food policy is not a recent term but a term with a history and therefore also a term with different meanings in different periods and different areas. Subscribing to a very broad understanding of the term policy, it can be assumed that most cultures in the history must have had some sort of food policy. Most societies, present or historical, do have principles about food and do take action to ensure that these principles are followed. Principles about food may, for instance, be based on religious, ethical, or economic principles.

In this sense, the idea of food policy has always been there even though it might not have been called food policy. However, both during World War I and World War II, the term food policy was much debated in public in the light of the restricted food supplies. Focus was on how to increase food supply. Food policy at that time was thus mainly an agricultural policy whose main principle was to ensure an efficient food supply to the population. Action was thus directed towards improving farming practices.

This understanding of food policy as an agricultural policy remains more or less unchallenged until the 1970s. The subsequent development of food policy has been subject to different interpretations. Maxwell and Slater (2003) goes as far as pointing to a shift of paradigmatic character in food policies, although this does not happen overnight but gradually over many years. They refer to an "old food policy" and the need for a "new food policy." Whereas the old food policy focused on agriculture and rural areas, the new food policies place more emphasis on food consumption, health, and environmental issues. The shift in food policy is thus a focal switch from food supply to food demand (Maxwell and Slater 2003, pp. 532-534).

Their distinction between old and new food policies has been criticized by Lang et al. (2009, p. 8) for not doing justice to the extent of the policy challenge and thus being too simplistic. They argue for a more nuanced division of food policy into four periods starting from the 1950s that reflects how food policy is at first concerned with first food supply and what they call productionism; then, food policies focus on markets and third world development in the 1970s; from 1980 to 2000, environmental issues and food safety increasingly enter the food policy scene; and finally from 2000 and onwards, focus turns towards ecological public health. This development of food policies reflects different ethical concerns present in different periods. Today, it is fair to say that all concerns are present within food policy discussions.

Debate on food policy takes place in different arenas and focus varies accordingly. Compared to the historical outline above in a development and third world perspective, focus has been and still is mainly on food security and nutrition security. Food policy in the development context is marked by the founding in 1975 of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) devoted to end hunger and malnutrition, and later, the Indian economist Amartya Sen (1981) gained international recognition for arguing for poor citizens' entitlement to food due to their vulnerable position in society. It is also in the early 1970s that food policy emerges as scientific field evident, for example, by the launching in 1975 of the academic journal Food Policy.

Thus, in the 1970s and 1980s, food security mainly became an issue discussed in relation to the third world, starvation, and poverty reduction (Timmer 2001). In the developed world as shown above, the shift in food policy is indeed a turnaway from food security and self-sufficiency that dominated the war periods and continued into the 1970s. Indeed, the issue of food security is taken for granted and considered as one of the successes of a market-oriented and (over)-efficient agricultural and food processing sector which has led to an overabundance of foodstuffs. This in turn results in new threats to health (like obesity and the associated diseases), and most recently also, the threats of food production and consumption to climate change are being recognized.

The shift in food policies is also mirrored in the renaming of ministries of agriculture to ministries of food and thereby underlining the move from the agricultural perspective to the consumer or demand perspective. Part of this change also reflects other social changes, for instance, there has been a massive migration from rural areas to urban areas. On a more operational level, public food policies are in some countries mainly gathered in one governmental department (e.g., Germany and Denmark), whereas food policy relating to food safety and food production in, for example, the UK has

been separated with reference to conflicting interests. Food policies are communicated by institutions in a number of ways like food policy documents, food regulations and laws, food certification schemes, advertisements, food procurements, etc.

In the light of the enormity and complexity of food policy, it can be debated if food policy should be divided into core areas that directly apply to food and those concerned with derivative or interrelated issues like health and environmental issues. Core areas that apply directly to food would typically be food production/supply or novel food. However, on closer inspection, the interrelatedness of these two issues with the demand side shows that, for instance, consumer health cannot be neglected in reflecting on how food supply and novel food should be developed and regulated.

It can likewise be debated whether food policy is to embrace other policy domains or if the other way around other policy domains should incorporate food issues into their policies. This may lead to controversies on the organizational structure and fights over policy domains in policy-making institutions.

Today, still broader and more integrative approaches to food policy are being proposed; an increasing number of areas are considered to be part of or incorporated into food policies. For the reasons outlined above, that food policy is an ambiguous concept. Recently, the education sector has been included in food policy, the aim being to promote basic food literacy and skills (see, for instance, Public Health Association of Australia [2009]) as part of a strategy to promote health. Also, climate changes have in recent years been introduced as a major element in food policy. Lang et al. (2009, p. 21) emphasize the embracive character of food policy, which makes it difficult to make a simple and concise definition of it. To simplify matters, at least 10 major traditional policy areas related to food policy can be identified:

- Research policy
- Agricultural policy
- Security policy
- Consumer policy
- Health policy
- Educational policy
- Environmental policy
- Trade and industrial policy
- Development and aid policy
- Transport policy

Efforts to Define Food Policy

The rapid changes in what is to be understood by the term food policy and the interrelatedness of the term have caused ambiguity as to the content and aim of food policy. Conceptual opacity is especially of concern for those involved in food policy-making. Clearly, one must know what food policy is about to make one. For this very practical reason, the challenge of defining food policy is most frequently undertaken by institutions involved in policy-making and less by researchers in academia. Chambolle (1988) refers to a French Interministerial Group for Food Policy set up in 1978 by which food policy was defined as the crossroads of problems linked with:

- Quantitative and qualitative adoption of agricultural production and food processes to meet the needs of well-balanced diets
- Food regulations intended to provide safe foods at value for money prices
- Distribution of food supplies, at both national and international levels
- Planning of research in agriculture and food processing, as well as in nutrition and food toxicology

This somewhat prescient understanding of food policy presents an embracive approach in which food policy includes agricultural research and production, food processing, healthy diet, food security, food safety, and affordability. Strictly speaking, in the sense that policy is used here, it is not a policy (principles and actions) but a list of areas that food policy applies to. Chambolle (1988, p. 456) also refers to the definition by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (1981) who in their report Food Policy states that "the term food policy . . . regards the food economy, which takes account of the interrelationships within the food sector and between it and the rest of the national and international

economy." From these two efforts to define food policy, it can be concluded that very early on in the transition of food policy, there was an awareness that food policy touched upon numerous issues and was interrelated with other policy domains that contributed to the complexity of food policy.

Apart from the increasing awareness of the interrelatedness of food policy with other policies, some authors also point to societal changes as drivers in the shift in focus of food policies. Timmer (2001, p. 787) mentions three social changes with an influence on food policy:

1. Globalization and the associated commercialization. For instance, the upcoming of supermarkets and the changes it leads to on the food market.
2. Urbanization leads, for instance, to a more profound split between food production and consumption and increased food miles.
3. The technological development. New technologies like the biotechnologies pose new bioethical questions with importance for food policy.

However, some efforts to define food policy do not directly embrace the inclusive approach but point to a more narrow focus on food. Neil D. Hamilton (2002) describes food policy as "any decision made by a government institution which shapes the type of foods used or available - as well as their cost, or which influences the opportunities for farmers and employees, or effects the food choices available to consumers." In the same line, the State and Local Food Policy Project (2005) suggests that food policy is "any decision made by a government agency, business, or organization which affects how food is produced, processed, distributed, purchased and protected." In these two definitions of food policy, emphasis is put on decisions by a government that exercises an influence on production, handling, and consumption of food whereas less importance is attached to the interrelatedness with other policy areas.

A final understanding of food policy to be mentioned here is that of Lang et al. (2009) which states that "we can define the study of food policy as of how policy-making shapes who eats what, when and how; and of whether people (and animals) eat and with what consequences." They continue to describe the remit of food policy, which "ranges from how food is produced and grown, to how it is processed, distributed and consumed; from the structures that shape food supply, to those that determine health and environment; from the sciences and processes that unlock food's potential, to the formal governance and lobbies that seek to control it; from the impact the food system's dynamics have on society, to the way its demands are factored into policy-making itself." In this understanding, emphasis is on the consequences of food policy for everyday life of food producers, handlers, and consumers as well as on the more systemic interrelatedness of food policy to other policy areas.

Major Matters of Principle in Food Policy

Given the long list of topics and goals that food policy embraces, it is not surprising that the list of ethical ideas and principles in food policy is quite extensive. It is not surprising that is not a common custom explicitly to supplement food policy goals with descriptions of basic ethical ideas and principles that these goals are based on. However, this is what this last part intends: to mention major ethical ideas and principles essential to food policy issues and goals.

Food security: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in article 25: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food . . . ." Food security concerns the demand side (consumers) and is based on vulnerability and integrity as the basic ethical principles. Rendtorff and Kemp (2000) argue that bioethics and biolaw in a modern welfare state are based on four ethical principles that are linked to each other in a social framework of solidarity and responsibility. These four principles are the ideas of autonomy, dignity, integrity, and vulnerability. Within food security, the most important principles must be those of integrity and vulnerability. Concern about integrity is not only care for a person's virtuous character but for the coherence of the life of that human being (Rendtorff and Kemp 2000, p. 39). Therefore, it includes both a psychological and a corporal dimension and the corporal dimension concerns "my own body." This dimension is vulnerable: the human being is vulnerable in the sense that it can be hurt and submitted to risks that threats its integrity. Thus, the principle of vulnerability imposes an appeal for the protection of the human person's integrity in a life span and a life space.

Therefore, the concepts of integrity and vulnerability are fundamental to legal systems protecting the rights of citizens.

Codex Alimentarius (1979) states that "food purchases utilize a significant portion of the income of consumers, particularly low-income consumers, who often also represent the most vulnerable group and from whom the ensurance of safe, sound and wholesome food and protection from unfair trade practices is critical."

Diet-related diseases: Food safety and nutritional behavior both focus on the risks of eating (see, for instance, Nestle [2002]). Food safety is based on the idea of the vulnerable consumer/citizen (Sen 1981). A more recent concept is that of nutrition security. Nutrition security exists when a person has a nutritionally adequate diet for an active and healthy life. The problem can be both lack of nutrients and access intake of nutrients. Also here, the principle of vulnerability is essential when protecting citizens and consumers from malnutrition. In the case of overnutrition like obesity, debates are among others on whether to blame the food industry or the individual. Proponents of the latter position argue with reference to the individual's autonomy that the individual's capacity for self-determination makes him- or herself responsible for the diet, whereas proponents of the first position argue that choice of diet is not an autonomous act but it is coerced by, for instance, the food industry, supermarkets, culture, etc.

Also here, the idea of vulnerability invokes responsibility as a virtue and obligation. The EU food law (2002) places the primary responsibility for ensuring compliance with food law, and in particular the safety of the food, with the food business.

Food and consumer choice: The idea of a free market and more recently the notion political consumerism both point to the influence of consumers on the food market and food production practices. A central ethical principle at stake here is that of autonomy.

Individual autonomy is a complex concept that refers to the capacity to moral insight and to self-legislation. It also refers to decision-making without coercion as well as it invokes the idea of certain responsibilities. The right of consumers to make free choices is based on the ideas of autonomy and freedom (Coff 2006, p. 181, Mepham 1996), which calls for increased transparency and traceability in the food sector (Coff et al. 2008). Respect for autonomy is partly reflected in Codex Alimentarius (1979), which states that "no food should be in international trade which, is labelled, or presented in a manner that is false, misleading or is deceptive." Respecting citizens and consumers autonomy in practice is dependent on the existence of a procedural ethics or discourse ethics that ensures citizens' access to information and to participate at some level in policy-making.

Food research and production: Respect for living beings: Food and agricultural research must like all research comply with standard ethical research principles like informed consent (based on disclosure, understanding, voluntariness, competence, and consent), data protection, and nonmaleficence (avoiding causing harm).

Informed consent presupposes both cares for autonomy and integrity, and therefore, integrity is mentioned in the second medical Helsinki Declaration that claims that "integrity must always be respected." Moreover, integrity is also a basic ethical principle in both food research and production as well as in the argument for the protection of animals and nature.

Food and environmental sustainability: Food policy has a strong link to environmental sustainability as food production is a heavy polluter and makes use of energy for production and transport (food miles). Beder (2006) presents the six major ethical principles within environmental protection that also apply to food policy: environmental sustainability, the polluter pays principle, the precautionary principle, the equity principle, the human rights principles, and the participation principle (procedural ethics).

Food and social justice: Codex alimentarius (1979) states that consumers should be protected from unfair trade practices. Fair trade is a concept that places social justice in a key position. Justice can be understood as a concept of moral rightness that focuses on fair distribution of benefits, risks, and costs without discrimination.

Summary

This entry gives an overview of food policy and major ethical principles that in the last decades have been proposed and advocated for in debates on food policy. Food policies touch upon a vast area of interrelated policies (like health, transport, environment, poverty, animal welfare, etc.) which makes of food policy a highly complex and diverse area. The entry opens with a description of the concept of policy and food policy and how it relates to ethical principles and values. The fourth section discusses some influential definitions of food policy. The final section contains a description of ethical principles and ideas of relevance to food policy.

Cross-References

Animal Welfare
Environmental Ethics
Food and Health Policy

Food Ethics
Food Safety
Food Security
Human Rights and Food
Nutrition
Political Consumerism
Trade Policy

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