Farmers' perceptions and perspectives in regard to agricultural policy making in Switzerland

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Abstract

Recent agricultural policy reforms in Switzerland claim to be the result of holistic approaches that take all actors of the food chain into account. However, the bulk of actors at the first (farmers) and last (consumers) stage of the food chain were mostly substituted by powerful organizations representing them. There is a growing discomfort among both farmers as well as in other parts of the civil society. A true holistic approach includes all actors among the food chain while accounting for their respective power relation. This analysis looks at the first stage of the food chain. We interviewed 75 grassland farmers about their perceptions and perspectives in regard to agricultural policy making in Switzerland. The statements cover a wide range of topics, that go beyond common narratives usually brought into political discussions by representative organisations. Our findings emphasize participatory approaches, spatial and structural differentiation of measures and the empowerment of networks.

Keywords: Agricultural Policy, power relations, semi-structured interviews

1. Introduction

The multifunctionality of the agricultural sector in Switzerland is legislated (Flury and Huber 2008), and thus a key objective of agricultural policy making. Especially grasslands provide various important ecosystem services beyond fodder production. Agricultural policies aim to preserve and incentivize less intensive, more environmentally friendly grassland cultivation practices to improve ecosystem quality. As these measures involve compensational payments,

their efficacy is crucial for efficient allocation of public money. However, the implementation of such measures not always delivers the desired result (Pe'er et al. 2019, Mack et al. 2020), as they are poorly designed in regard of farmers' willingness to comply (Christen et al. 2015, Brown et al. 2021).

Traditionally, agricultural policy making has been the result of scientific knowledge, economic principles and political opinion (Matthews 2021). Recent policy reforms acknowledged the need for more holistic approaches (De Schutter et al. 2020, Möhring et al. 2020). The greening cycle of agricultural policy making in Switzerland (Metz et al. 2021) and EU (Pe'er et al. 2019) thus involved a variety of actors. However, most actors at the first (farmers) and last (consumers, citizens) stages of the food chain were represented only by influential organizations., Growing unease with agricultural policy among Swiss citizens is reflected in several popular initiatives demanding more sustainable agricultural practices (Huber and Finger 2019). Public disapproval of agricultural policies can also be observed in other countries (e.g. Germany, see Michels et al. 2020). Farmers perceive such trends as a lack of social recognition (Contzen and Häberli 2021). To overcome this situation, a truly holistic approach is needed, that includes interests of all actors and takes into account their respective power relations (Jacobi et al. 2021).

In this paper, we aim to fill the opinion gap on the first stage of the food chain, i.e. the farmers' side. We provide direct insights into farmers' perceptions and perspectives on agricultural policy making, based on qualitative data from 75 semi-structured interviews. We present the abundance of different topics in terms of statements, but also in terms of single farmers' perspectives. Using these insights, we propose possible improvements in policy design.

The relation between farmers' perceptions and their compliance with agricultural policies and regulations have been examined in other contexts before, however with a focus on specific issues. Christen et al. (2015) look at non-compliance of farmers regarding environmental regulations. They use fuzzy cognitive mapping to draw on results of interviews and workshop sessions with Scottish farmers, and found conflicting perceptions among stakeholders to be the main reason for non-compliance. Kelemen et al. (2013) assess French, Hungarian and Italian farmers' perception on biodiversity by focus group methodology. They find a high level of awareness of farmers towards not only biodiversity, but also social and ethical values of agricultural landscapes. Further, farmers stressed that in their view, current policies fail to protect biodiversity. Wezel et al. (2018) look at farmers' perceptions, preferences and

propositions regarding result-oriented measures in grasslands. They conducted a total of 79 interviews in the mountain areas of Germany, France, Austria, Italy, and Switzerland. Their results show that farmers had a preference for result-oriented measures in spite of higher complexity in implementation. Finally, farmers' perception of administrative burden and corresponding willingness to participate in an agri-environmental program (Mack et al. 2019) or corresponding perception of agricultural policy (Mack et al. 2021) was analyzed using 808 replies to a survey. They found that farmers who perceive a high level of administrative burden are less likely to participate in an agri-environmental program and are dissatisfied ("grumpy") with current policy making.

The afore mentioned studies focused on specific issues, but often find an overall picture on farmers' general perceptions and perspectives as a side effect of their research. For example, Kelemen et al. (2013) had to adapt their coding strategy to account for the high level of knowledgeability of farmers. In contrast to this, we kept our investigation open, and draw on the affective imagery related to agricultural policy making (Slovic et al. 2007). Further, to obtain saturation in topics, we aimed for a large number of interviews. Our results therefore give an overall insight on all kinds of topics that concern farmers.

This paper is organized as follows: in chapter 2, we explain our methodological approach, including our field, data collection by interviews, and coding of our qualitative data. In chapter 3, we present our results. In chapter 4, we discuss our results, and draw final conclusions in chapter 5.

2. Methodology

Our methodological approach must allow for a holistic insight into farmers' attitudes towards agricultural policy making, without a predefined set of topics or opinions. Therefore, our qualitative approach is based on Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss 1990). We gathered our data through various open questions that were part of a semi-structured interview survey[1]. Through several inductive *open, axial* and *selective* coding loops, we identified structure and overarching themes among farmers' statements.

[1] The interviews were part of a broader study assessing the drivers and barriers related to the adoption of environmentally friendly grassland management practices.

2.1. Sampling and data collection

We conducted 75 semi-structured interviews with farmers from the Swiss agricultural mountain zones I to IV[2]. In these zones, topography and climate constrain arable crops or horticulture. Therefore, farmers need to rely on permanent grasslands (and related ruminant animals) for agricultural production: 88% of the agricultural area is defined as permanent grassland (Federal Office for Agriculture FOAG 2019).

Interviewees were recruited among the members of the Swiss Grassland Society (AGFF[3]). In February 2020, all members received detailed information on the overall goal of the project as well as a short questionnaire inquiring their location, farm size, production type and stocking density. They learned that participation in the interviews was voluntary, but would be compensated through a 75 CHF gift card for an agricultural goods retailer. 242 farmers from the mountain zones indicated interest in being interviewed. Among these respondents, we ensured an even spatial distribution of farms. We chose to interview 25 conventional intensive (>1 ruminant Livestock Unit per grassland hectare (LSU/ha)), 25 conventional extensive (<1 LSU/ha) and 25 organic farms, but avoided extremes in each management intensity group. Further, we selected farms proportional to the total numbers of their management intensity group within each mountain zone.

By accessing census data from the Farm Structure Survey (BFS, 2016), we were able to retrieve past changes in our participants' grassland use intensity in terms of ruminant stocking rates on grasslands. The Farm Structure Survey contains detailed information on land use and animal production for each farm. To calculate stocking rates, we divided aggregated livestock units[4] per category of cattle, goat, sheep and other roughage-eating livestock by aggregated hectares of grassland categories, including pastures, meadows and temporary grasslands. To determine

[2] In Switzerland, agricultural zones classify the agricultural land into six levels: plain, hill, and mountain I to IV (FOAG 2020). The classification considers climatic conditions (e.g. length of growing season), accessibility and land slope.

[3] The «Arbeitsgemeinschaft zur Förderung des Futterbaues/Working Group for the Promotion of Forage Production» (AGFF) is an association of all farmers and institutions in Switzerland interested in forage production. The association has about 3'000 members.

[4] In order to ensure comparability, livestock units are defined for each livestock type. The definitions according to Swiss legislation are as follows: cow=1LSU, dairy goat=0.2LSU and dairy sheep=0.25LSU (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 1998).

past changes in grassland use intensity within the last five years before the interviews, we subtracted the stocking rates of 2016 from those of 2020. We define intensifying farms (Int) as farms with an increase of more than 0.05 LSU/ha, while extensifying farms (ext) decreased their land use intensity by more than -0.05 LSU/ha. All other farms are considered to not have changed their land use intensity (Stay). Summary statistics of all interview partners can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary statistics of interview partners

	Extensive	Intensive	Organic
Total number of interview partners	25	25	25
Number of interview partners by mountain zone:			
I	3	11	6
II	11	12	5
III	9	2	7
IV	2	0	7
Roughage-eating livestock unit [LSU]	26.4	39.1	26.8
Hectares of grassland [ha]	32.0	24.7	26.6
Grassland use intensity [LSU/ha]	0.8	1.6	1.0

The interviews took place from October – December 2020. Prior to each interview, participating farmers received further information about data use, privacy and processes in case of an emergency, and signed a letter of consent for ethical approval. As due to COVID-19 restrictions, face-to-face interviews were not possible, we conducted interviews over the phone. Anonymized[5] recordings of these phone calls were verbatim transcribed for further analysis.

All 75 interviews were conducted by three scientific employees with a degree in agricultural science. The interviewers aimed to take the role of an ally (Lune and Berg 2017) by showing high interest in what was said, and relating farmers' reports to own experiences or knowledge without ever contradicting them. This trusting situation was needed to ensure farmers to speak openly about their opinions, as we wanted to avoid a possible response bias towards socially desirable believes and opinions (Social Desirability Bias, Nederhof 1985).

2.2. Semi-structured interview questionnaire

[5] Farmers' names were not spoken out during the recording, and they were interrupted when giving too detailed accounts of their farm that would reveal their exact location.

Our entire semi-structured interview questionnaire aimed at assessing drivers and barriers regarding the adoption of environmentally friendly grassland management practices. Three questions, scattered at different points of this survey, motivated farmers to talk about their perceptions and perspectives in regard to Swiss agricultural policy making. In a first, general block, farmers talked about their farm, production conditions as well as management strategies. After this block, they were directly asked

[Question 1] *"what does it mean to be a farmer nowadays?"*,

leading them to elaborate freely about perceptions on chances, barriers, roles and expectations – not just in regard to policy making, but also in regard to their whole environment including other farmers, consumers, and the whole society. Question 1 was followed by some questions on their self-identity as a (good) farmer. The following question

[Question 2] *"what barriers do you think there are to farmers being good land managers/farmers?"*

aimed directly towards their perception on barriers and unmatched expectations. After Question 2, a block of close-ended, likert-scale questions further enquired farmers' self-identities as well as some general questions on agricultural policies. Finally, interviewers asked

[Question 3] *"according to your opinion, how should agricultural policies be shaped?"*.

As this question came after farmers thoroughly reflected on their self-identity, it resulted in farmers intensely elaborating on various topics that apparently were triggered by foregoing questions.

2.3. Open and axial coding

We used MAXQDA, 2022 (VERBI Software 2021) to analyse records and verbatim transcripts of every interview. The *open coding* comprised two inductive coding loops. In a first loop, the first author of this paper coded all answers and statements of farmers to Question 1 – Question 3 and identified a total of 14 topics. During this first loop, a codebook with related coding rules was established. The second coding loop allowed for further amendments and standardisations of the first-loop coding.

During the *axial coding*, we structured our codes according to similarities / differences in both content and framing of farmers' statements. This resulted in mapping the 14 topics regarding two gradients: complaint-solution and going backwards – going forwards. While some topics concerned complaints towards current issues in agricultural policy making, others contained specific solutions on how to improve current agricultural policies in Switzerland. Among these solutions, some add more details to current policies, some aimed at continuing and expanding current policies, and some aimed at reversing developments in policy making.

Finally, *selective coding* led to detecting fields of tension and agreement within the map of the 14 topics. Through these fields, the interpretation of the 14 topics gains in depth and conclusiveness.

3. Results

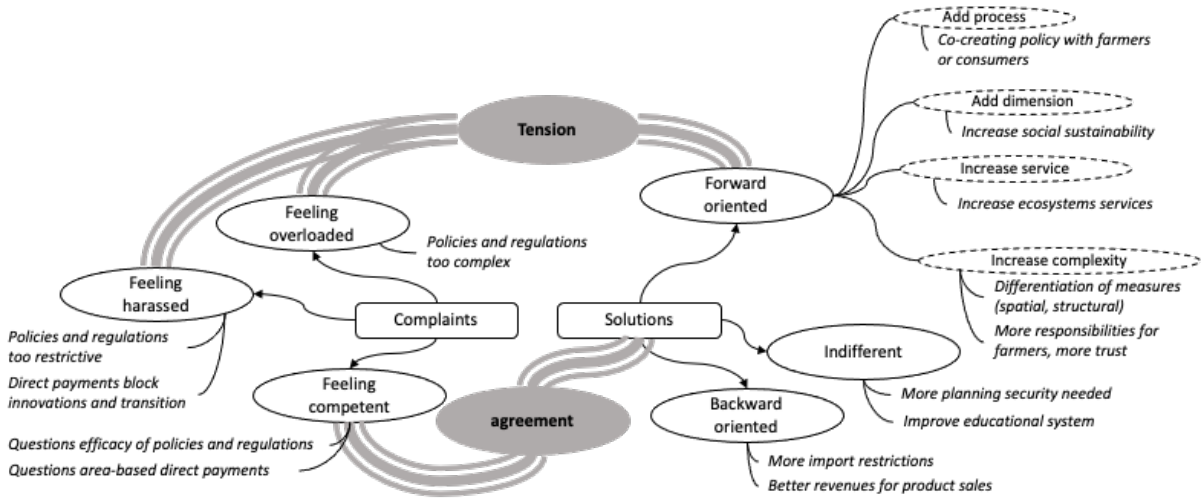

Figure 1: Map of topics (italic texts) and their relation (similarities, differences) to each other (ellipses for categories), as well as fields of agreement and fields of tension (grey).

We coded a total of 190 statements, that can be categorized as complaints (83 statements) or solutions (107 statements). The number of statements per topic and complaints gives a first quantitative impression on the abundance of attitudes towards agricultural policy making among farmers (see Table 2). In the results' first subchapter, we complement each topic with sample quotes from interviewed farmers. All topics can be mapped according to similarities and differences (i.e. the result of axial coding), as can be seen in Figure 1 and in the structure of Table 2. Overarching fields of tension and agreement are further examined in the results' second subchapter, again complemented with sample quotes from interviewed farmers.

3.1. Complaints

The common aspect of statements coded with topics referring to complaints (83 statements) is the lack of any solution. This can be explained by the farmers' idea that agricultural policies come from outside their field, and are forced upon them. Hence, they feel that they do not possess enough power to change anything anyway. Nevertheless, farmers conveyed different sentiments in their statements that allows further differentiation of these complaints.

Table 2: Number of statements per topic and category, according to all farms, different management intensity groups (organic, extensive and intensive), and past in- or extensification strategies[a]. int = farms that intensified their land use intensity by more than 0.05 LSU/ha, ext = farms that extensified their land use intensity by more than -0.05 LSU/ha, stay = farms with less than ± 0.05 LSU/ha change, within five years before the interviews.

Attitudes towards agricultural policies	Number of statements															
	All farms				Organic				Extensive				Intensive			
	All	Int	Stay	Ext	All	Int	Stay	Ext	All	Int	Stay	Ext	All	Int	Stay	Ext
Complaints	83	28	28	23	28	5	**13**	9	23	6	6	**11**	32	**17**	9	3
Policies and regulations too complex	18	8	2	8	**5**	1	1	3	**6**	2	0	4	**7**	5	1	1
Policies and regulations too restrictive	26	10	10	4	9	3	5	1	5	2	2	1	**12**	5	3	2
Direct payments block innovations and transition	7	1	3	2	**3**	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	**4**	1	2	0
Questions efficacy of policies and regulations	27	9	11	6	**9**	1	6	1	**10**	2	3	5	**8**	6	2	0
Solutions	107	40	20	37	34	9	5	15	39	13	10	16	34	18	5	6
Forward oriented	53	14	12	**22**	**23**	4	3	**11**	16	5	6	5	14	5	3	6
Differentiation of measures (spatial, structural)	23	9	5	9	10	4	2	4	9	3	2	4	4	2	1	1
More responsibilities for farmers, more trust	4	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	3	1	1	0
Increase ecosystems services	16	3	3	**6**	8	0	0	4	6	1	3	2	2	2	0	0
Increase social sustainability	10	2	1	**6**	3	0	0	2	1	1	0	0	6	1	1	4
Co-creating policy with farmers or consumers	5	1	2	2	2	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	2	0	1	1
Indifferent	21	10	3	6	4	**3**	0	1	8	1	2	**5**	9	**6**	1	0
More planning security needed	17	9	2	5	3	3	0	0	8	1	2	5	6	5	0	0
Improve educational system	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Backward oriented	32	15	6	8	7	1	2	4	14	**7**	3	4	11	**7**	1	0
Better revenues for product sales	22	11	4	6	3	1	0	2	12	5	3	4	7	5	1	0
More import restrictions	10	4	2	2	4	0	2	2	2	2	0	0	4	2	0	0

[a]For four farms, not enough data was available to calculate past in- or extensification strategies. Therefore, sum discrepancies may occur, as these farms do not appear in the colums of int, stay and ext.

Table 2 shows the frequency of complaint statements among different production types (organic, extensive and intensive) as well as past strategies of farmers (intensified, extensified, or did not change their production). Among organic farmers, those that did not change their production raised most complaints (13 statements). In the group of extensive farmers, complaints came from those who extensified in the past (11 statements), while for intensive farmers, those who intensified in the past complained the most (17 statements).

We can group statements that indicated a feeling of being overloaded by the complexity of current policy making (18 statements, evenly distributed among organic, extensive and intensive farms). They feel *"stressed"* by regulations, by office work *("to do everything in writing")* and even see it as a reason to give up business.

(ID-34 Question 1) «And stress is also caused by the regulations that come more and more. That you don't forget anything, laws, animal welfare, that you always think of everything. That means stress.»

(ID-72, Question 2) «Also what you have to do everything in writing. Again, I know someone who gave the business to the descendant because he couldn't do it anymore. That bothers me a little bit too.»

Another group of statements refer to a feeling of being harassed by agricultural policies and regulations (26 statements, 12 of them coming from intensive farms). They perceive agricultural policies and regulations as too restrictive, as barriers for "*progress*", created by "*subversive*" outsiders. Often, this refers to "*environmental"* policies and regulations. Especially direct payments are seen as barriers for innovation and progress, as they keep farms *"alive"* that otherwise would not be viable anymore.

(ID-54, Question 3) "More precisely, by all the Directorates General for the Environment, measures that are very subversive, very restrictive, very archaic and that do not meet the criteria of progress of our time."

(ID-50, Question 2) "These direct payments keep many pseudo-farm managers alive"

The last group of statements refer to a feeling of being more knowledgeable than policy makers. They frequently indicated that policy schemes are not effective (27 statements, evenly

distributed among organic, extensive and intensive farms). They see rules that "*contradict*" the objectives, but *"they just enforce their rules"*. Especially area-based direct payments are questioned (7 statements). According to the interviewed farmers, it led to a hoarding of *"more land"* that is "*not managed ideally"* anymore.

(ID-13, Question 3) "Yes, I had a dry meadow[6], I'm sorry to say, and the longer I had it, the more restricted the cultivation became, and I'm no longer allowed to fertilise it. And that would have been a plot that could well tolerate fertiliser every few years. And now there is no more biodiversity there, and I have fallen out of the programme with this area! So that's just a pity, it makes it worse. You should maintain the quality as much as possible, but they just enforce their rules, and that simply contradicts itself."

(ID-68, Question 3) "We should look less at the area, because at the moment everyone simply wants more land. And thus, these areas are not ideally managed."

3.2. Solutions

A total of 107 statements were coded with topics referring to a solution (Figure 1, Table 2). Farmers suggest more detailed, case-specific measures or proposed an expansion on current policies (forward oriented: 53 statements), ask for better framework conditions (indifferent: 21 statements) or simply suggested to reverse developments in policy making (backward oriented: 32 statements). Forward solutions are favored by extensifying (a total of 22 statements) and organic farmers (23 statements). This does not surprise as they may already pursue a strategy that would profit from further continuation and expansion of current policy making. Indifferent were farmers who changed their grassland use intensity in the past. More precisely, they were organic and intensive farmers who further intensified (3 and 6 statements, respectively), or extensive farmers who extensified (5 statements). Most backward solutions came from intensifying farmers. This result is reflected among extensive and intensive farmers (each 7 statements).

Case specific measures included a spatial and/or structural differentiation of measures (23 statements), or more responsibilities for farmers (4 statements). Farm location, i.e. production

[6] *Note: In Switzerland, so called dry meadows are areas protected by the Federal Act on the Protection of Nature and Cultural Heritage. Owners of such meadows are obliged to maintain its biodiversity quality, but receive compensation payments.*

"conditions", size (*"area"*) or *"infrastructure"* should be considered for direct payments to make it *"fair"*. Further, farmers stated that they do not like to be "*patronized"* and would appreciate "*more responsibilities"* in "*how farmers get to the goals"* set by a measure. Even though this would increase the complexity of agricultural policies on the paper, it was not perceived as such by any of the farmers.

(ID-65, Question 3) "It is quite hard to tell. Like if you look at my business and my place, you cannot transfer the same conditions to all of Switzerland. There are many other places with different conditions."

(ID-23, Question 3) "Direct payments should be degressive with increasing area. As a farm, you have a certain amount of machinery and infrastructure. If I had 30 hectares instead of 22, I could use the same machines and infrastructure. And so [with a degressive approach] there would be a bit more fairness."

(ID-11, Question 3) "Part of it would be to leave more of the responsibility to the farmer. That was also preached for a while, that you set the goal and then leave it up to the farmers themselves how they get there. Less patronized."

Further forward-oriented suggestions aim towards an increase of both environmental and social sustainability (16 and 10 statements, respectively). "*Landscape conservation*" here goes hand in hand with the general *"well-being of the population"*. In a socially sustainable system, a "*respectful"* treatment of *"people"* means that "*farmers"* would be a part of policy making (5 statements).

(ID-67, Question 3) «Forward-looking, i.e. one must take into account the environment, the increase in population and landscape conservation as well. And the general well-being of the population, in harmony with the beauty of the landscape.»

(ID-54, Question 3) "For me respect is a fundamental value, politics must respect people. So allow the farmer to work in collaboration with umbrella organisations, with research institutes, with training, with extension groups."

Statements are labelled as indifferent if they do not imply any changes per se, but address the general framework of policy making. Thus, some farmers stated that for them, the actual direction of agricultural policies are of less importance as long as it does not *"change every 4*

years". Thus, the need for more planning security was stated 17 times. One farmer indicated that farmers would fit one's way around better if he had *"more knowledge"* through better education.

(ID-79, Question 2) "Every 4 years there are these changes [of agricultural policy] and we make changes [on the farm] because there are direct payments but we don't have a line where we want to reach an objective."

(ID-23, Question 3) "If the farmer had a little more knowledge, he might know that a little less land can produce the same amount of agricultural yield. But perhaps it would be more environmentally friendly. Some of the areas cultivated on the farm are very far away, and I wonder if the farmer has ever calculated what he earns with this land. ... The breadth of our profession requires at least a 4-year apprenticeship. And above a certain size, a farm manager training would have to be a prerequisite."

We called the last group of statements as backward oriented as they aim to reverse developments in policy making. There are two issues at stake: import restrictions (10 statements) and price subsidies (22 statements). In both cases, the overarching issue are that farmers like to earn money from their production *("good prices") "rather than"* from externalities (i.e. ecosystems services) that are compensated by *"direct payments"*.

(ID-36, Question 3) "There is no direct need for border protection for milk in order to get a good milk price. Instead, it would be necessary to prohibit the import of soya from South America, for example. Because if you import soya as concentrated feed, you are in fact importing milk."

(ID-59, Question 1) "Direct payments are also one of those things: most farmers would rather get the income through the products than through the direct payments"

3.3. Fields of tension and agreement

Our axial coding revealed fields of tension and fields of agreement among statements of complaints and statements of solutions. We detect tension between statements containing complaints about complex and restrictive policies and statements that demand even higher complexity through e.g. co-creation of agricultural policy or spatial and structural

diversification. Fields of agreement occur among (complaining) statements showing high knowledge regarding the efficacy of agricultural policies and solutions.

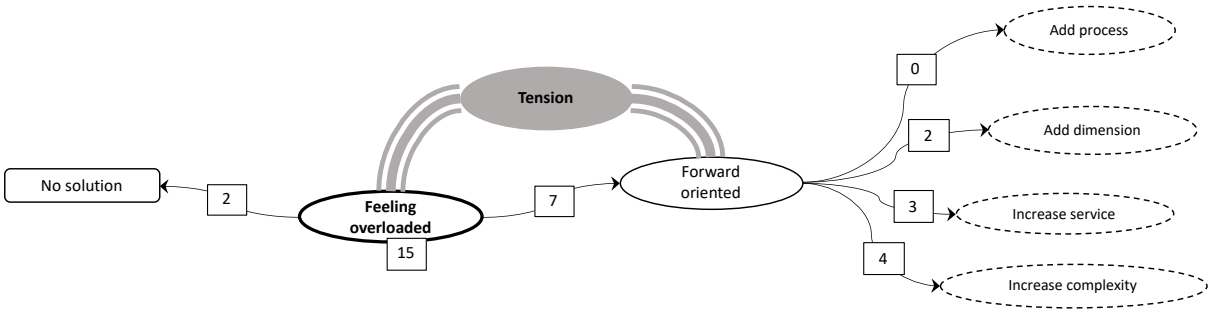

Figure 2: Number of farmers stating that they feel overloaded (15 farmers) and at the same time express no specific solution (2 farmers), or propose forward oriented solutions (7 farmers) such as increasing complexity in policy making (4 farmers), further ecosystems services (3 farmers) or more social sustainability (2 farmers). None of the farmers feeling overloaded suggested co-creation of agricultural policies.

While the last sub-chapter focused on the total amount of statements to depict the abundancy of opinions, here we take a closer look at the person behind it. In Figure 2, we see that among the farmers stating that they feel overloaded (15 farmers) by *"a relatively complex system"*, only 2 do not state to a solution afterwards. 7 farmers actually refer to solutions that would even increase the complexity of agricultural policy making. Upon a closer look, however, it becomes evident that these are solutions that mean to bring policy making *"closer to the people"*, e.g. through "*Regional advisors"*

(ID-58, Question 2) "Partly, it is difficult to understand everything. There are various programmes and direct payments, and the system is relatively complex. I understand that not everyone is able to manage."

(ID-58, Question 3) "But it [agricultural policy making] would have to be closer to the people - of course this varies from canton to canton. In other words, more regional advisors would be needed to look after it. Instead of it being decided administratively from far away, from Bern or the canton, from the office. It needs to be closer to the people."

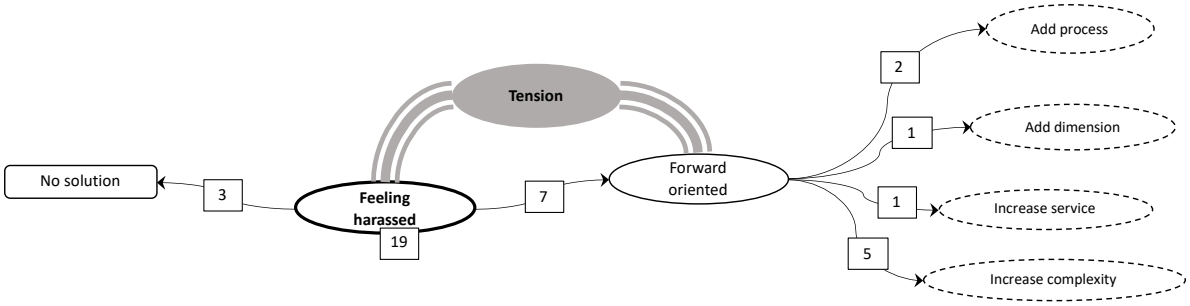

Figure 3: Number of farmers stating that they feel harassed, i.e. too restricted by agricultural policies (19 farmers), and at the same time express no specific solution (3 farmers), or propose forward oriented solutions (7 farmers) such as increasing complexity in policy making (5 farmers), further ecosystems services (1 farmers), more social sustainability (1 farmers) or co-creation of agricultural policies (2 farmers).

In a similar way, among farmers that feel harassed by "*policy and its regulations*" (19 farmers), 7 farmers state solutions that can be categorized as forward looking, and would even further increase complexity (Figure 3). Again, what they seek are policies that are closer to their reality, their *"different conditions"*. Current policy making is perceived as to be *"pushed through"* against *"what farmers want"*.

(ID -65, Question 2): I think, policy and its regulations can be barriers sometimes. And these changes you need to adapt to, and every time you want to do that, you have additional costs. And the problem is that it changes very fast.

(ID -65, Question 3): If you look at my business and my place, you cannot apply the same conditions to the whole of Switzerland. There are many other places with different conditions. But if you go further and further into lower altitudes, we also have a problem at some point, even if we take great care of the environment. For me, it is important to have a good forage. You can't compare that with a farm in the Jura or in Graubünden. And when politics pushes something through, it's usually not what we want.

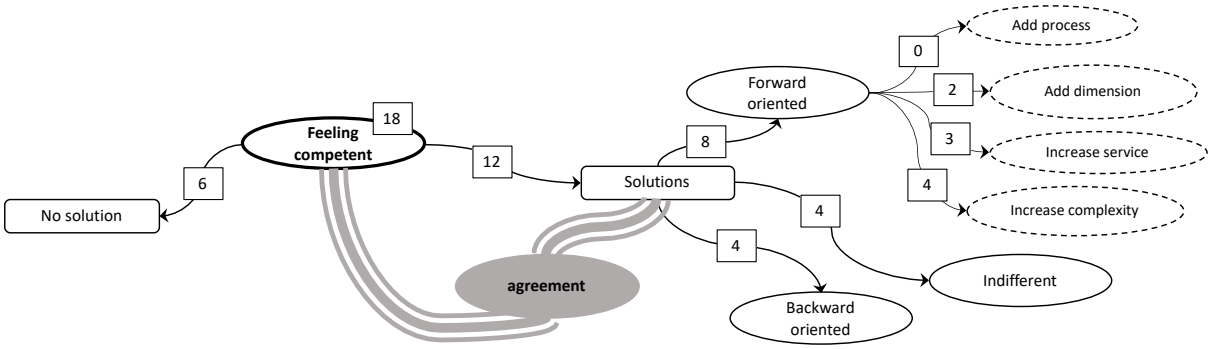

Figure 4: Number of farmers stating that they feel competent, i.e. knowledgeable in regard to policies' efficacy (18 farmers), and at the same time express no specific solution (6 farmers), or propose solutions (12 farmers). Forward oriented solutions were proposed by 8 farmers. 4 farmers also suggested changes in the general framework of policy making, and 4 farmers stated backward oriented solutions.

Our axial coding revealed a field of agreement among farmers feeling competent and stated solutions. We would assume that farmers who show competence, i.e. by questioning efficacy of agricultural policies, will provide corresponding ideas for improvement. Nevertheless, shown in Figure 4, only two third of farmers feeling competent stated complaints without providing any specific solutions. The common statement in this category aimed towards strict *"regulations on cutting time, fertilizer and grazing"* that in reality counteracts *"the diversity of plant population"*. In this regard, the statement *"being ashamed of yourself"* shows how disconnected farmers are with current policy schemes. Therefore, farmers demand policies that *"account for the environment"* and stand in line (*"harmony"*) with *"the beauty of the landscape"* and the *"general well-being of the population"*.

(ID-67, Question 3): 20 years ago, small areas, 15-20 acres, of valuable land were added to the eco[logical] areas[7]*. Today, the quality of the land has declined. The theoretical ideas have not worked out. 20 years ago, if an eco[logical] area looked nice, people agreed that it was right the way it was. Otherwise the plant population would not be so diverse. Then came regulations: cutting time, fertiliser ban, grazing ban [on the areas]. The logical consequence is that a change will take place. And now? Now we have thistles and thorns. These are unbelievable problems, you almost have to be ashamed of yourself*

(ID-67, Question 3): [Agricultural policy should be] Forward-looking, i.e. one must take into account the environment, the increase in population and landscape conservation as well. And the general well-being of the population, in harmony with the beauty of the landscape.

4. Discussion

The 75 interviewed farmers showed deep and conclusive understanding of the agricultural production system and all three dimensions of sustainability. They seem to despair at the complexity and restrictiveness of agricultural policies, as they observe its inefficacy. Yet they propose solutions that appear to be even more complex in regard to spatial and structural differentiation or co-creation of policies. This shows a large perceived distance between current

[7] Among farmers, biodiversity promotion areas are called «eco areas". Farmers are obliged to segregate at least 7% of their agricultural area to biodiversity promotion areas. Cultivation on these areas are restricted, but compensated by payments.

agricultural policy making and the farmers' reality. In addition to the already revealed lack of recognition by citizens, they also perceive lack of recognition by policy makers and scholars.

Farmers' statements also revealed how they would like to be recognized and appreciated. An important aspect is earning their income through products rather than direct payments. This, however, does not directly reflect e.g. the farmers' lobby goals on high production and a corresponding high self-sufficiency rate (Mann and Kaiser 2023). Further, as they do perceive their role as protectors of the environment, landscape and general well-being, they ask for more responsibility, de-centralized regulations and co-creation of policies. This is in line with findings of Celio et al. (2014), who have shown a high level of concern for the environment among Swiss farmers.

5. Conclusions

We interviewed 75 grassland farmers in the Swiss agricultural mountain zones I to IV about their perceptions and perspectives in agricultural policy making. Farmers' statements in these interviews cover a wide range of different topics that go beyond the narratives brought into political discussions by their representative organizations such as the farmers' lobby. Thus, in contrast to findings of previous studies e.g. by Mack et al. (2021), we would refrain from calling farmers' discomfort with the complexity of current policy making as "grumpiness", resulting from complex administrative burden. On the contrary, our results showed large perceived gaps between farmers, policy makers and consumers/citizens that cannot be closed by simply reduce complexity or improve communication (Christen et al. 2015).

Overall, farmers were constructive and knowledgeable, as more than half of all statements included tangible strategies for policy improvements. This even culminates in the specific demand of more involvement of both farmers and consumers in agricultural policy making. Spatially and structurally more differentiated policy measures may be one of many possible solutions: By empowering local networks among farmers and consumers/citizens, the perceived recognition gap could be reduced (Anderson et al. 2019). Territory-based measures have been shown to be an effective complement to single-farm measures (González De Molina and Lopez-Garcia 2021). However, perceptions and targets need to be aligned carefully to prevent failure of bottom-up initiatives (Mann and Kaiser 2023).

A true holistic approach would need to include consumers/citizens perceptions as well. Further research needs to analyze consumers as well as enable exchange among both parties. A true holistic approach to reach sustainability goals of the agricultural sector is inevitable. If agricultural policies are not able to meet citizens' sustainability demands, it becomes hard to justify the use of public money for compensation payments (Huber and Finger 2019).

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