

Welfare certificates contested

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Introduction

In the animal welfare debate, more markets are increasingly often called upon to heal the market failures experienced in our animal production and consumption systems. In its animal welfare strategy the European Commission (2012) has underlined the importance of certificates in taking into account new consumer concerns and incorporating higher welfare standards into animal production. The certificates should allow producers to regain the added-value from their investments in welfare, whilst consumers should gain reliable information to enable them to choose welfare-friendly products. By reconfiguring both supply and demand, the markets for higher welfare products would steadily diversify and the market failures would be resolved. In such a market configuration the state remains mainly in a supportive role, with legislation setting the baseline for animal protection.

In Finland, no specific welfare certificates are yet in use, apart from the

certificate for organic production. Discussion over animal welfare and certificates is however intense. The Federation for Animal Protection Associations has made an account on a welfare label and its criteria for different production sectors.¹ The WWF has also drafted criteria for “pasture meat” which also include welfare aspects.² Animal welfare scientists, for their part, have tested and developed animal-based criteria for assessing animal behaviour in Finnish conditions (Blokhuus 2013; Huhtakangas 2011). None of these accounts by NGOs or researchers have, however, resulted in actual certification.

In July 2013 the Finnish Food Safety Authority (EVIRA) gave an approval for a national quality system for responsible pork production, later la-

¹ <http://www.sey.fi/seytoimii/kultus-ja-elainsuojelu/hyvinvointimerkki> (accessed 20.1.2016)

² <http://wwf.fi/alueet/suomi/metsalaidunhanke/luonnonlaidunliha/> (accessed 20.1.2016)



belled as “Laatuvastuu”.³ The certification was claimed by the Association for Animal Health (ETT), which oversees the health care and disease prevention of livestock in Finland.⁴ The ETT is owned and co-financed by the major slaughterhouses in Finland. The quality certificate verifies a health care system for swine, which guides the preventive health care work carried out at the farms. The health care system has been in operation since 2003. It was originally developed to synchronise all the work the major slaughterhouses had done on disease prevention; now they require the participation from all their contract farms. In 2013 90% of pig farms and 97% of pig production took part in the health care system (Nikunen and Kortesiemi, 2014). In the case of “Laatuvastuu”, the certification did not aim at creating new markets for higher animal welfare products, but rather at “pacifying the product” (Çalışkan and Callon, 2010:6) so that it could respond to the rising public concern over animal welfare and maintain its competitiveness in ever globalising meat markets.

At this point, it is critical to evaluate and cumulate empirical evidence on the achievements of welfare and quality certificates. In this overview I discuss

3 The direct English translation of the label would be ‘Quality-Responsibility’. See www.laatuvastuu.fi (accessed 20.1.2016)

4 See <http://www.ett.fi/sisalto/ett-english> (accessed 20.1.2016)

the results gained from the study, where I followed the making of the certificate for responsible pork production, its approval and uptake. I have interviewed all the major actors who took part in the process and analysed the manifold set of documents, formulas, decisions and advertisements related to the certification. The results indicate that sustaining market positions in the global meat markets necessitates ever more sophisticated and impressive means of verifying and differentiating quality from competitors, but also from legislation. However, animal welfare as a public concern is a particularly “hot” thing to measure and verify (cf. Callon 1998). The case calls further attention to the controversies in measuring and commensurating animal welfare and the distributional effects they have on the dynamic organisation of markets, but also on the development of welfare legislation.

Quality certificate for responsible pig production

According to the decision by the Food Safety Authority (EVIRA), the quality certificate for responsible pork production “exceed the requirements of legislation notably with regards to animal health [...] and significantly with regards to national public health” (EVIRA 2013, 1). This decision was important for the pig chain actors: the verification of quality attri-

butes now allows them to differentiate the Finnish pork production from its main competitors abroad and turn the investments on preventive health care into premium in the markets. Furthermore, the certification of the system allows them to show that no further legislation is needed in this regard. The whole of Finnish pork production fares “slightly better” in this regard, as one quality manager from one slaughterhouse put it.

In their application for the certificate, the ETT had stressed that in addition to animal health and food safety, the health care system works also for a much wider interest of preventive health care and animal welfare. The health care formula, which guides the preventive health care work at the farms, includes also a few welfare indicators. EVIRA, however, demarcated these claims for higher welfare out of the certificate in its decision: “with this regard the quality system – is based mainly upon the making of the health care plan and its follow-up” (EVIRA 2013, 4). It does not measure animal welfare.

After the approval of the certificate, also the welfare scientists and the animal protection NGOs challenged the certificate by arguing that differentiating with animal welfare would call for stricter animal-based measures that place greater attention to the behaviour of the animals. A few welfare indicators added to the system do not suffice; the boundary

values for mortality and carcass rejections should also be higher. Producers and veterinarians, for their part, stated that only a few indicators built into the health care formula assist them in developing production conditions and animal welfare at the farm. Neither does the certificate guarantee any greater returns to producers in that regard.

The way in which the certification opened the welfare criteria to public evaluation and contestation is no surprise. As a specific socio-cognitive device, this feature is characteristic for any certificate (Eden et al. 2008). When marketing the quality certificate to consumers the criteria developed by the slaughterhouses and veterinarians for their own quality control proved fragile in another sense as well.

They are such foreign matters [...] consumers do not want to know if they are chewing on tails or not. They do not even want to know that it is a possibility, anywhere [...] or that there are animals that actually die prematurely in the chain, or that mortality is at such low levels. Because they will, whatever the case, be astonished that there is mortality. How can this be communicated to the consumer without shooting ourselves in the foot? [...] How do we get that added-value, so that they understand it, but without rubbing it in their faces? [laughs]
(Responsibility manager, slaughterhouse).

Although the measured performance of these indicators was intended to assure consumers about the qualities of domestic pork, it was feared to threaten the very same attachment in the meantime. Consumer studies have highlighted how holistic concerns over natural behaviour and living conditions are more important to consumers' understanding of animal welfare than the measurable absence of suffering, pain or frustration as emphasized in producers' or veterinarians' practice (Lassen et al. 2006; Miele & Evans 2006). In the case of the pork quality certificate, the knowledge provided by the health care system was indispensable for proving the qualities of Finnish pork, but uncomfortably "hot" at the same time.

In general, it should be noted that the certificate for responsible pork production has not garnered that much attention amongst the public (cf. Jokinen et al. 2012). The most prominent critics, the animal protection NGOs and the welfare scientists, have not stayed silent, however. We are still lacking the welfare label, they state. Rather than proving the sufficiently good health of the whole Finnish swine population, the welfare certificate should differentiate the Finnish pig production according to the animal-based criteria.

Animal welfare contests markets in a profound way

The quality certificate for responsible pork production was not able to tame the public debate over the welfare of Finnish pigs. The concerns that the certificate aimed to "pacify" keep troubling markets. The "hot" component associated with animal welfare further suggests that they "cannot be internalised once and for all, because they are linked to irreducible uncertainties" (Callon 2009, 541; see also Miele & Lever 2013). Animal welfare lacks unambiguous definitions and measurements (Fraser 2008). The debate over the pork quality certificate further shows that the different actors assess it from fairly different perspectives.

The concern over animal welfare cannot be concealed simply by talking in terms of market failures. It contests the markets in a far more profound way. It "causes [markets] to be in a constant state of disequilibrium, traversed by forces of reconfiguration", as Callon (2009, 541) has emphasised in his writings on negotiated markets (see also Callon 1998). The results gained from the quality certificate for responsible pork production call for further attention to the means of measuring and commensurating animal welfare in these reconfigurations. They are needed both for sustaining and contesting market positions. In the case of the pork quality certificate, the animal-

based measures allowed the welfare scientists and the NGOs to intervene and demand more attention to be given to the natural behaviour of the animals. The animal-based measures, however, could not be directly integrated to the health care system, which is designed to secure high levels of health and production efficiency in conventional domestic pork production as a whole. Differentiation with animal-based measures would have disrupted this very unity the certification of the health care system was intended to secure – and sustain.

We social scientists, but also policy makers, need to become better equipped

in evaluating such conditions under which the agreement on the measuring and commensurating of animal welfare is established as well as the distributional effects they have on the dynamic organization of markets. The results gained from the pork quality certificate underline striking asymmetries in the measurement devices. Such asymmetries require further attention when assessing the potential of the welfare certificates in differentiating meat markets. They also need to be taken into account when designing the criteria for new welfare legislation. The quality assurances in certificates evolve always in parallel with legislation.

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