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International Food and Agribusiness Management Review
Volume 18 Issue 4, 2015

Exit, Voice, and Loyalty in the Case of Farmer Associations: Decision-Making of Dairy Farmers during the German Milk Conflict

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Abstract

The abolishment of the dairy milk quota, increasing fluctuation of milk prices, and the ongoing structural change in the European milk sector led to the so-called milk conflict. Farmers reacted with protests, membership resignation from the German Farmers' Association and milk delivery strikes. The study analyzes dairy farmers' decision-making under pressure with respect to their association membership and their participation in the strike with a qualitative research approach. Data includes 34 personal, in-depth interviews with farmers and experts. Results show that rising dissatisfaction and exerted pressure by members of the Federal Dairy Farmers Association resulted in decreasing loyalty and voice, and a higher likelihood to exit from the German Farmers' Association.

Keywords: decision making, EVL, grounded theory, milk strike, peer pressure

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Introduction

The German Milk Conflict was an emotionally charged conflict within the dairy industry, between 2007 and 2009. The conflict encompasses a nation-wide movement with its core area in southern Germany. Culmination points of the conflict were two milk delivery strikes, blockades of streets and creameries, as well as public milk obliterations. Relevant factors during the course of the conflict were declining milk prices and increasing price volatility. Furthermore, based on the enacted abolishment of the dairy milk quota in the European Union (EU), planned for April 1st 2015, uncertainty regarding the market development after the deregulation ensued. Many dairy farmers lost confidence in the German Farmers' Association (GFA) representing their interests, and in the agricultural policy on the federal and European levels. During this stage, the Federal Dairy Farmers' Association (FDFA) presented a relatively new option for representing dairy farmers, enabling them to express their frustration concerning their income development and the political developments. The demands of the FDFA were a base price of 43 cent/kg milk compared to a milk price of 34 cent/kg milk in May 2008 (LfL 2008), a raise of the conversion factor (liter to kg from 1.02 to 1.03), a creamery contribution of 5 cents for each kg of milk delivered for marketing purposes, and a more flexible dairy quota system (Top Agrar Online 2008).

The GFA's lack of support for the milk delivery strike caused substantial anger among dairy farmers. As a consequence, a rising number of dairy farmers resigned from the GFA and joined the FDFA. Prior to this development the GFA had been the opinion leader and main representative of German farmers, without any significant competition (Landvolk). The GFA was founded in 1948 and currently represents about 300,000 members. It is the largest and oldest farmer association in Germany (GFA). In contrast, the FDFA was founded in 1998 and reports to represent 30,000 members (FDFA). The FDFA was able to activate and mobilize the majority of its members and could increase membership numbers during the milk conflict.

The study is framed within the broader field of conflict management research, more specifically the topic of decision-making during conflicts. The objective of this study is to analyze the decision-making of affected dairy farmers. In particular, two decisions of the farmers are analyzed, the decision to terminate GFA membership and the decision to participate in the milk delivery strike. The analysis builds on and expands the exit, voice and loyalty theory (EVL) of Hirschman (1970), with the further objective of investigating the applicability of the EVL theory to this case.

Literature Review

Three fields of research are relevant to the analysis, the classical conflict research, research concerning the EVL approach, and research related to cultural characteristics of farmers' behavior in conflict situations. The general conflict literature is diverse, but recent studies place emphasis on factors influencing conflict development and conflict communication. Schwarz (2005:53), for example, identified three different conflict communication levels: rational, emotional, and structural. Concerning important conflict factors, especially trust, solidarity, and personal values are highlighted. Greenberg (2003: 309) emphasizes trust as an extraordinarily important factor. Referring to Simmel, Coser (1972: 39) highlighted that solidarity increases

within the same social stratum. Krysmanski (1971: 128) confirms that social cohesion of a group increases during external conflicts, if shared values and a working group structure exist.

The milk conflict can be analyzed within different theoretical frameworks. One alternative to the chosen EVL framework would be a social movement framework. Benford and Snow (2000: 614) stated that “[...] *collective action frames are action oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization (SMO).*” For example, Valdez (2012) investigated farmer protests in Warsaw within social movement theories. The conflict is characterized by multiple commonalities with the milk conflict, especially the economic triggers (i.e., decreasing income and rising market competition). However, the frame leads Valdez (2012) to focus on the formation of a highly mobilized and coordinated group from unorganized actors.

In September 1999, 30,000 farmers and workers protested in the center of Warsaw due to a decade of economic austerity, after the democratization in Poland in 1989 (Valdez 2012: 1). One of the measures to support farmers during this difficult period was the transformation of the large state-run cooperatives into smaller ones to improve the competitiveness of Polish farmers (Valdez 2012: 2). These smaller cooperatives became mobilization networks. Although Valdez (2012: 16) points to activists “[...] *opposing reduced subsidies, low prices, and increased international competition [...]*,” she concludes that opportunity and resources were shaping the pattern of protest among the farmers. She determined that “*The restructuring of co-ops helped to solve collective action problems among members, so farmers were more likely to engage in protest [...]*” (Valdez 2012: 17). Accordingly, Valdez’s study focused on mobilization and group dynamics whereas the study of the German milk conflict focuses on decision-making on the individual level in the context of peer pressure. Due to the focus on farmers’ decision-making during a conflict situation, the EVL-framework seems better suited than the social movement theory, and is used to structure the results.

The basic EVL theory consists of the three factors exit, voice, and loyalty. In a later expansion of the model, neglect was introduced (EVLN model). Exit means withdrawal from an organization or reduced, respectively, missing consumption of a specific product. Voice represents a constructive or destructive feedback about an unsatisfactory condition related to an organization or unsatisfying characteristics of a product (Hirschman, 1970: 4). Loyalty is understood to be the solidarity to an organization, product, or manufacturer and is differentiated into active and passive loyalty. Neglect describes the lack of organizational citizenship behavior or care (Withey and Cooper 1989: 521). Overall Hirschman’s model is based on a customer’s perspective in the context of products, respectively, employee’s perspective towards exit from an organization. In this study, the EVL-model is transferred to associations and their members. Neglect is not included in the analysis, because it does not fit the conflict analyzed. The elements voice and loyalty are evaluated as constructive behaviors while exit and neglect are destructive behaviors. Concerning exit, Grima and Glaymann (2012: 7) mentioned that a withdrawal from an organization can be closely linked to a decline in income, loss of reputation, fear of reprisal, and also emotional outbursts. Cognizant of existing alternatives, employees are more independent, and therefore, the likelihood of exit increases (Grima and Glaymann 2012: 6). Another relevant factor concerning the exit decision is the belief whether performance improvement is likely. In contrast, voice can be seen as an attempt to improve the situation. Typical interactions through

voice can be individual or collective complaints to the management, as well as protests and actions to influence the public opinion (Hirschman 1970: 30). The likelihood of voice increases with loyalty. Hence loyalty can be characterized as a decisive influence on the choice between exit and voice.

For organizations, in particular regarding the recuperation from performance lapses, Hirschman (1970: 24) emphasizes that a mixture of inert as well as alert customers are necessary. Both fulfill an important function, alert customers provide feedback in order to give the organization a chance to adapt, and inert customers are important for the stability of an organization. Inert customers give the company the financial resources to implement the changes and the time to execute the changes. Furthermore, Hirschman (1970: 62-64) also posits a trade-off between profit maximization and discontent-minimization. During a quality change, organizations struggle to assess which group of people or customers will be pleased and which group may be discontent with the changes. The organization should be aware that if a quality change in one direction provokes exits, because discontent members or consumers have an alternative organization, then a quality change in the opposite direction would primarily cause voice of dissatisfied but captive members or consumers (Hirschman 1970: 74). Furthermore Hirschman points to the fact that the situation is complicated by the influence of loyalty (Hirschman, 1970:75).

The third part of the literature review focusses on the cultural characteristics of the actors involved in this conflict insofar as they might differ from actors in other sectors. Fassnacht et al. (2010: 84) mentioned that the agricultural sector is shaped by family businesses, characterized by the co-existence of emotionality, which culturally is attributed to the realm of the family, and rationality, which is attributed to the business realm. Family businesses require multiple roles of the actors involved, which limits the ability to process information and act based on only the factual level. Feindt (2010: 264) discussed that in crisis situations, including structural changes of the market, limited adaptability of farm managers correlates with the termination of many family farms.

Methods

The study is based on a qualitative research approach because of its advantages in exploring social realities. This is due to the possibility to allow multiple perspectives within the research process and to acquire subjective perspectives (Bitsch 2005). The use of qualitative methods can challenge researchers' assumptions about the phenomena examined, and additionally uncover areas of variation, inconsistency, or contradiction (Griffin 2004: 8). Therefore a qualitative research approach offers the possibility of an in-depth analysis of a social phenomenon. In-depth analysis is particularly suitable for this research, dealing with an emotionally charged conflict situation. Furthermore, a major advantage of the qualitative research approach is the “[...] *ability to use the complex variables that are part of [...] theory without having to translate them into the one-dimensional indicators that can be processed by statistics*” (Gläser and Laudel 2013: 14). Limitations of qualitative research include the cost of the data collection and analysis and its high time-intensity. Additionally, using qualitative research methods competently requires training and experience (Griffin 2004: 9). Qualitative research also is not suitable to answer

questions regarding the share of particular characteristics or attitudes in a population (Punch 2014: 161).

The research procedure is based on the Grounded Theory concept introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Bitsch (2009: 3) emphasizes that “[...] *although grounded theory is typically framed in the context of discovery and theory development, its usefulness also extends to qualification and correction of existing theory where in-depth understanding of the actors’ perspectives is paramount.*” Accordingly, this study uses a variant of the Grounded Theory approach, where the aim is not the development of new theory, but the application and, as appropriate, adaptation of existing theory, based on the interaction between theory and data.

According to Bitsch (2005: 77) the grounded theory process can be subdivided in the following recursive steps: deciding on a research problem, framing the research question, data collection, data coding and analysis, and theory development. The process of data collection for developing theory is called theoretical sampling. During this phase the researcher collects, codes, and analyzes data, and decides with respect to which categories of the developing theory, data is not yet sufficient. During the sampling phase, the researcher must ensure the systematic variation of conditions (Bitsch 2005: 79). Thus, the researcher has to determine what data to collect next, based on the overall goal to evolve the theory. Bitsch (2009: 6) mentioned that the aim of theoretical sampling is to provide additional data and therefore fill the gaps of the developing theory. The saturation is expressed by a decreasing number of new codes created and recurring similar quotations toward the analyzed issue. This process controls the amount of data collection deemed necessary (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 45).

The data collection process in this study consisted of reviewing trade magazines and newspaper, as well as in-depth interviews of informants involved in the conflict. All interviews were conducted personally by the first author who also transcribed the interviews. The next step after each interview is the transcription of the audio data. Depending on the type of analysis planned, several transcription techniques are available. In this case, the interview data were transcribed verbatim, only transforming the natural language of the informants, most of whom speak in pronounced local dialects, into more standard German. After the transcription, the next step essential to a grounded theory approach is the conceptual analysis of the data. During this process the interview excerpts are transformed into conceptual categories, and further on become parts of a theoretical framework. After reading the transcripts several times, the researchers start to attach so-called codes to interview excerpts. All codes that remain in the final analysis become part of a code system. During the recursive analysis codes are aggregated to categories and their relationships are analyzed. While coding is broad and open in the beginning, it becomes more specific and selected as the analysis progresses. Therefore, after coding for a category a number of times, the theoretical thinking about the category becomes more pronounced and is requiring researchers’ reflection about the category respectively its properties (Bitsch 2009: 6). The codes are the smallest units of analysis. They can be either based on specific theoretical concepts from the literature, such as in the case of this study the EVL theory, or they can be newly developed by the researchers based on what is found in the interview statements and the researchers’ overall theoretical knowledge and experience.

In this study, coding was performed with the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti 7.0. The software is a tool to support the analysis process through search, retrieve, logic, and other functions, but does not actually replace the repeated reading and coding of all interview transcripts. The software is designed to support systematic development of a code system during the data analysis. However, the researchers must still read each instance of code and compare it to all other instances of the same and similar codes within one interview, as well as all other interviews. This process of “constant comparison” consists of four stages: comparing incidents, integrating categories, delimiting the theory, as well as writing the theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 105-113). It leads to the transformation of interview excerpts, through codes and categories to theoretical concepts and, as in the case of this study, modification of existing theory based on empirical findings and conceptual development. As the analysis progresses, the process moves from natural language of the informant, in which similar perceptions and experiences can be expressed in many different ways, to more abstract concepts, and more general observations and regularities that are the building blocks of theory. Additionally, an important part of the research process are memos, which conceptualize the data in a narrative form (Lempert 2007: 245).

The data collection of this study included a total of 34 interviews with an average length between 1.5 and 2 hours. The interviews were conducted after the milk-strike between January 2011 and January 2013. The focus of the interviews was on the perception of the milk conflict, the decision-making during the milk conflict, and the conflict tactics of the associations involved. The regional focus of the interviews were the German states of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, as the main conflict areas. Informants included dairy farmers, agriculture, dairy, and association experts, as well as politicians, and experts of conflict management (see Table 1). Many experts are part-time farmers or have family members who are farmers. The decision rule to distinguish between farmers and association experts is as follows: informants are grouped as dairy farmers, if their association involvement is limited to the rural district. Farmers with statewide or nationwide association activity are grouped as association experts. The theoretical sampling has led to inclusion of regional differences, different farm sizes, and variation in age and membership (GFA, FDFa, or both) within the farmer group. At the time of their respective interview, five farmers were GFA members and five were FDFa members, two were members of both associations. Of the five farmers who were only FDFa members, four had exited the GFA.

Table 1. Overview of Interviewee Groups

Interviewee Groups		Number (n=34)
Farmers (dairy)	Farmers, farmer spouses, junior farmers	12
Agriculture Experts	Experts of the agricultural sector, editors in chief	5
Dairy Experts	Dairy market experts and creamery CEO's	4
Association Experts	GFA and FDFa	9
Conflict Experts	Experts of conflict and change management	2
Politicians	Local politicians in agriculture and environment	2

The recruitment of the informants differs for the interviewee groups. Farmers were chosen based on newspaper articles, as well as through suggestions by other farmers and experts, and targeting

the main conflict areas. Experts and politicians were identified through internet search based on their position and field of competence. The conflict experts were recruited through suggestions by other experts. When asking informants for suggestions (snowball sampling), the request was to also name people with a view completely different than their own.

Because of the emotional involvement of many informants in the research topic, the interviews were conducted in an open manner. They were based on a semi-structured interview guide with variants for the different groups of informants (e.g., dairy farmers, association experts, conflict experts, or politicians). Topics included relevant information, such as association membership, farm size, age, and education, as well as viewpoint regarding market regulation. Next, informants were asked to discuss their perception of the dairy conflict (background, pattern, personal position, positioning of GFA and FDFA). Building on their elaboration of the initial situation, the interview was directed toward the opinion formation of the informants during the dairy conflict, strike participation, exit of the GFA, and joining the FDFA. Furthermore, the conflict aftermath, the emotional development was brought up by the interviewer (see interview guide in the Appendix). The full interview transcripts amounted to over 800 pages analyzed during the research process.

Results

Despite additional knowledge of the researchers on the milk conflict and also further information from the scientific literature, trade journals, and newspapers, the results build mainly on the in-depth analysis of the interview transcripts. Explanations based on the results of analyses are illustrated by statements from the interview excerpts. In an effort to improve readability, the natural language of the informants has been corrected for major grammatical errors in the quotes used. The first part of the result section focuses on the decision-making of dairy farmers regarding resignation of GFA membership. In this context it is important to know that *GFA membership* is a short form. Farmers are actually members in local farmer associations, which are then members in the umbrella organization GFA. To further improve readability of the paper, we discuss GFA exit. But farmers do not exit the GFA, they do exit their local farmer association (for example the Bavarian Farmers Association). The second part covers the decision-making concerning participation in the milk strike. In both parts, dairy farmers are differentiated into a convinced group and a pressured group. The convinced group includes dairy farmers who sympathized with the FDFA and therefore were dissatisfied with the GFA. The pressured group includes dairy farmers who felt forced toward an exit or strike decision by FDFA supporters.

Decision-Making of Dairy Farmers Regarding GFA Membership Resignation

The analysis is subdivided into the EVL classification of dairy farmers' actions during the milk strike and influencing factors on the likelihood of exit. Hirschman's (1970) EVL model is transferred to the analyzed conflict in the agricultural sector. The classification serves to structure farmers' actions during the conflict. The different categories of the model were defined according to the context analyzed. Based on the detailed analysis of the interview transcripts, the EVL model has been adapted to the organizational context (farmer associations and their members) and, furthermore, differentiated to better reflect farmers' actions in detail.

EVL Classification of Dairy Farmers during the Milk Strike

Dairy farmers' actions during the milk strike fit well with the EVL model. For the dairy farmers' decision-making, the exit category can be differentiated into three subcategories (Table 2). The first subcategory comprises dairy farmers who resigned their GFA membership due to conviction (convinced exits). Typical for this group is a simultaneous application for a FDFA membership. The lack of support of the GFA for the FDFA requests, dissatisfaction with the GFA and with the economic developments are reasons for their decisions. Additional exit reasons were the lack of identification with the GFA president, at the time, and the upper GFA management in general.

The second exit subcategory comprises dairy farmers who resigned their GFA membership based on pressure (pressured group). In most cases the exit decision of dairy farmers was due to the perceived pressure to participate in FDFA organized membership resignation events or to sign a pre-drafted letter of resignation promoted by the FDFA. Within the pressured group two subgroups can be distinguished, exit under pressure and silent withdrawal from exit. The silent withdrawal represented an attempt of pressured farmers to rejoin the GFA without losing face in the community. Accordingly, the reentry should be undisclosed, so that other community members would not immediately recognize their change of mind. They cancelled their resignations orally contacting responsible GFA officials. This behavior was based on the fear of losing standing in the community, and therefore the withdrawal from exit had to be implemented in silence.

The voice category also consists of three subcategories (Table 2): claimed voice, voluntary voice, and destructive voice. Claimed voice represents the demand for feedback by GFA officials due to the lack of feedback that they had received. Exiting GFA members were approached with a request for feedback from GFA officials. Interviewed association experts reported that many farmers struggled to explain their reasons for the exit. The second voice subcategory, voluntary voice, was most important for the GFA to realize the level of dissatisfaction and to gain insights how to respond to it. During the milk strike, voluntary voice was on a very low level. Reasons for the missing voice were the emotional conflict development, as well as the fear to get visibly personally involved in the conflict. Altogether the milk conflict was dominated by destructive voice explained by dissatisfaction, fear, anger, and emotional upheaval. The destructive voice was exercised mainly by members of the convinced group who often already had become FDFA members.

Loyalty is subdivided into active and passive loyalty (Table 2). In this case, active loyalty includes convinced GFA members, who were supporting the GFA in public and not participating in the milk delivery strike. Altogether, active loyalty was shown by a small group of GFA members, which were a minority during the conflict. Passive loyalty represents dairy farmers who agree with the GFA, but did not support the GFA in public. As a trigger for passive loyalty many interviewees mentioned peer pressure, threats, and the public opinion against the GFA. Loyalty is closely tied to the quantity and quality of voice. The extent of loyalty is often related to the belief in the ability of the GFA to change. Therefore, a close relationship between passive loyalty and decreasing voice could be identified for the farmers interviewed. Overall, the loyalty level of convinced farmers toward the GFA was very low.

Table 2. EVL Decision Making of Dairy Farmers

Categories	Definitions	Statements
Exit	Convinced Exit	Resignation of the GFA membership, often linked with joining the FDFFA <p><i>“We did not feel represented” (Farmer 12, FDFFA)</i> <i>“I [...] saw a lack of will on the side of the GFA to react [...]. They saw no need, they simply said, okay, it will simply happen like that and that’s it” (Dairy expert 4).</i> <i>“[...] they said, I am disappointed, you betrayed me, I resign” (Association expert 7, GFA).</i></p>
	Pressured Exit	Participation in mass membership resignations due to FDFFA members’ requests and pressure <p><i>“[...] for three weeks they went from house to house in the village, and persuaded people that they should sign [the resignation]” (Farmer 1, GFA).</i> <i>“[...] FDFFA membership will cost you nothing. How will it cost me nothing? You just take off the 40 € from the GFA, or best you resign there, and have even saved money. That was the argument” (Dairy expert 5).</i></p>
	Silent withdrawal from Exit	Exit under pressure and afterwards a silent withdrawal from exit; trying to hide the withdrawal from the community <p><i>“[...] first everyone exited, and in the end everyone is calling and saying, we have signed that too, but we would like to stay a part of it, but no one may know about it” (Farmer 1, GFA).</i> <i>“This is really a big issue. So, once they announce, I have now resigned, and then reenter, but you have been the biggest shouter and you have encouraged us, and now you are a traitor or defector [...]” (Dairy expert 5).</i></p>
Voice	Claimed Voice	Feedback demanded by GFA representatives from resigning members who became FDFFA members <p><i>“Okay, that is everyone’s free choice, but still you are also an active volunteer. You sit down now, and write a letter, and write to me and [the GFA president] what bothers you. [...] You do want to achieve something. So, please write to me what exactly bothers you. Well, then, I got a call a few days later, I should say what concerns us. Because they could not say what exactly was bothering them” (Farmer 1, GFA).</i></p>
	Voluntary Voice	Unrequested feedback toward GFA officials concerning the positioning of the GFA or the mood at the member base, with the goal of finding a solution <p><i>“I went to FDFFA events frequently, in the beginning. I am now also on the milk committee or in the district for the GFA, because I simply believe that you have to listen to all sides, and if you are not complaining than you can’t be heard [...]” (Agricultural expert 5 and part-time farmer, FDFFA & GFA).</i></p>
	Destructive Voice	Unrequested feedback to GFA officials without taking the GFA’s perspective into account and with the goal of imposing own opinion <p><i>“He [...] read his resignation from the GFA publicly at a meeting. Everyone knows he has worked for years for this association. That means pressure over years” (Association expert 1).</i> <i>“The GFA completely missed out on taking the member base with them concerning the milk policy” (Farmer 3, FDFFA).</i> <i>“The [GFA president] was a very fame-hungry person” (Dairy expert 2).</i></p>
Loyalty	Active Loyalty	Convinced GFA members, supporting the GFA publicly, not participating in the milk delivery strike <p><i>“Commonality, well, I mean, the GFA as a whole is surely the right institution for us farmers, a good thing” (Farmer 11).</i></p>
	Passive Loyalty	Agrees to the GFA’s perspective, but based on the public opinion against the GFA does not support publicly <p><i>“I could tell you about villages in the [...] region, where nobody dared to say, no, I will not drive to the [FDFFA] demonstration. There was a certain group pressure” (Farmer 9, GFA).</i></p>

Identified Impact Factors on the Likelihood of Exit

Within the EVL theory decreasing loyalty and lack of voice are indicators of a decision process leading to the exit decision. But in order to get to this state, certain conditions have to be met (Figure 1). As origin for decreasing loyalty, dissatisfaction was mentioned by all interviewees. Especially dairy farmers belonging to the convinced group described mostly the dissatisfaction as a trigger for their decreasing loyalty and the resulting destructive feedback or absence of voice. The overall dissatisfaction with the GFA resulted from dairy farmers' perception of the GFA as an inactive association with respect to market liberalization, especially the abolishment of the dairy milk quota and the increasing milk price volatility. Several farmers claimed to use exit as an implicit voice function to initiate an impulse for development within the GFA.

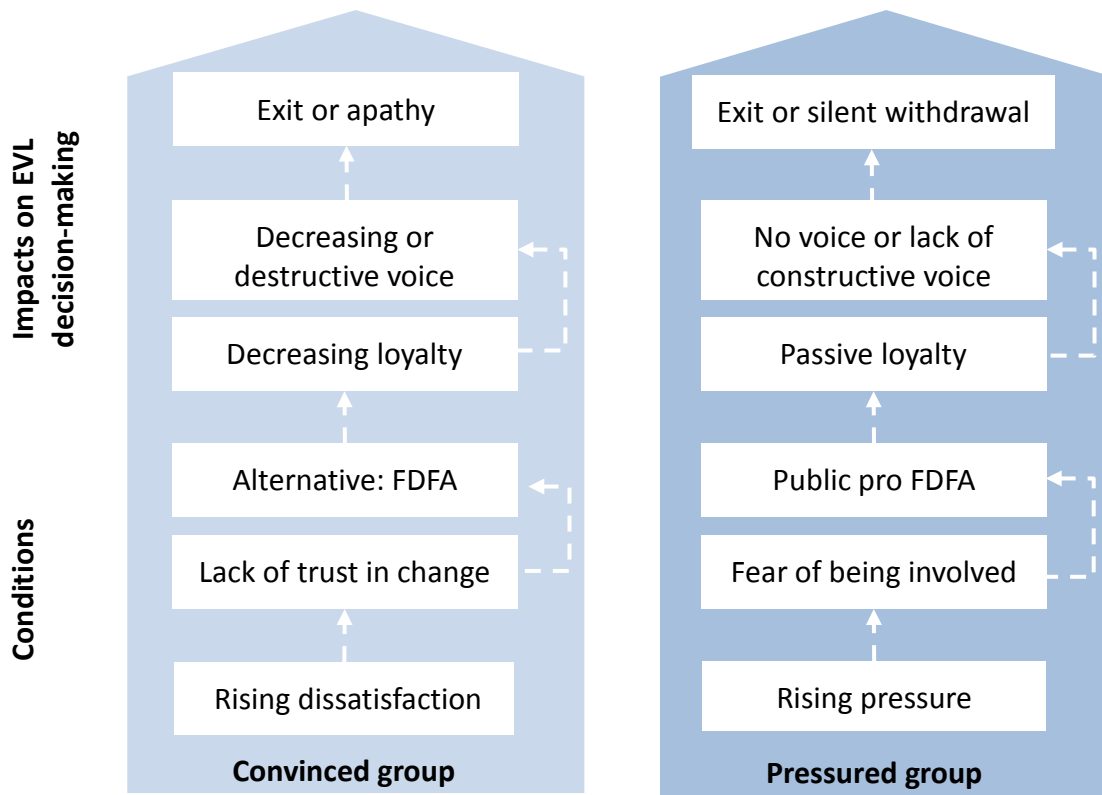


Figure 1. Likelihood of GFA exit differentiated by the convinced and pressured groups

Destructive voice by critical GFA members dominated the further conflict development. To explain destructive voice, the interviewees mentioned the loss of trust in the GFA and its ability to change its strategy toward the support of the FDFA requests. In the beginning, farmers were still convinced that changes in the GFA would occur, and, therefore, tried to foster change through constructive feedback. But with increasing pressure and lack of success, the feedback level decreased or became more destructive.

Loyalty was further decreased by the existence of the FDFA, which was perceived as an alternative to the GFA during the milk conflict. Several of the dairy farmers interviewed joined the FDFA, which often included support of the FDFA vision and an active involvement in the

FDFA activities. Further, the availability of an alternative association in form of the FDFA, specifically representing dairy farmers, is an important impact factor. In a negative cycle the increasing dissatisfaction led to decreasing loyalty and a rising number of passive members. As a consequence, the FDFA swayed the public opinion against the GFA. Again, the quantity of voice decreased or became destructive, resulting in GFA exit or apathy toward the association policy (Figure 1, left side).

For the pressured group the driving factor is not dissatisfaction, but the peer pressure by the convinced group to exit the GFA in order to increase the pressure on the GFA to support their requests. In this context, the fear of many farmers to become personally involved played a major role in their decision-making. Even when they were not convinced to exit the GFA and not dissatisfied with the association's work, they exited to avoid personal consequences. At this point, it is important to know that the public opinion has been against the GFA, and this led to the active loyalty of pressured GFA members to turn into passive loyalty strongly affiliated with missing voice. Finally this led to the exit decision, and in some cases to silent withdrawal from exit (Figure 1, right side).

Decision-Making of Dairy Farmers Regarding Milk Strike Participation

Since the first part of the results explicated the decision process to exit the GFA, the second part focusses on the decision-making concerning a participation in the milk strike. Although both decisions show many similarities, their analysis is separated for theoretical reasons and because the majority of the GFA farmers interviewed dealt with both decisions separately. For many farmers in the convinced group the GFA exit also meant participation in the milk strike, as they mentioned the lack of support from the GFA for the milk strike as one of the main exit reasons. For the pressured group the decision-making process regarding the milk strike took a different form with two potential outcomes. One group of farmers gave in to the pressure and participated in the milk strike, the other group did not participate at all. In this part, the personal perceptions during the conflict and the factors impacting the decision-making, especially emotions, as well as the influence of the family on farmers' decision-making take a more central role than in the first part. The high emotionality and the peer pressure is demonstrated by the fact that of twelve farmers interviewed only two did not participate in the milk strike. Five of the seven GFA farmers interviewed were participating in the strike, a FDFA action. However, as also emphasized by the experts, many of these GFA members only participated one or two days to show their solidarity and decrease the pressure.

Decision-Making of the Convinced Group to Participate in the Strike

Similar to the exit decision process, the dissatisfaction with the price development played an important role in the participation decision of the convinced group. Another reason to participate in the milk strike was curiosity to try strike as a protest form. Furthermore, several of the dairy farmers interviewed stated that they were impressed by FDFA events they participated in. For example, one interviewee explicitly stressed the process dynamic as following:

“There has been an incredible group dynamic; and the group dynamic was uncanny. So, in some villages, not all, there were participants who are saying that it was the best time of their lives. This also happens, because one has met every day at someone's home, cooked together, and looked up the latest news on the internet. Being mean, one could say, that is a cult; that was similar to a cult” (Farmer 1, GFA).

Their own genuineness was mentioned repeatedly by dairy farmers as an important personal motivation to participate in the milk strike, especially if they were FDFFA members. They wanted to act as role models for undecided farmers and thereby support the FDFFA. In addition, the participation in the milk strike provided an opportunity to the dairy farmers of the convinced group to see what they could achieve together. Hence, several farmers explained their decision for the milk strike as an investment in the future.

“The other thing is, one has to know, as I already mentioned, which opportunities are there, and what the limits are. What has been really important for the milk strike was to palpate how the creameries react. That was very important, and also how politicians react, and how the consumer reacts” (Farmer 8, GFA).

The quotes also indicate that the broader objectives of convinced dairy farmers were to gain public attention and increase pressure on politicians. Farmers wanted to emphasize their own position of power as milk producers in the dairy value chain. Overall, the decision-making was influenced by a wide variety of emotions due to farmers’ high emotional involvement in the conflict.

Table 3 provides an overview of the perceptions of farmers in the convinced group. The table illustrates the emotional issues during the conflict development and important factors impacting the decision-making process. For the convinced group, predominant perceptions were positive, such as enthusiastic or powerful. This reflects the positive perception of the majority of farmers in the convinced group regarding the conflict atmosphere. But besides the positive perceptions, negative perceptions, such as fear about distortion of competition or loss of face, were also present.

Table 3. Convinced Farmers’ Perceptions Regarding the Decision Process to Participate in the Strike

Perception	Definition	Statements
Curious	Gain knowledge about the effects of a milk strike, gauge the reactions of important players	<i>“[...] we would still debate the strike around and around. And now everyone knows clearly, this can be achieved and not achieved [by a milk strike] and then it is easier to gauge”</i> (Farmer 8, GFA).
Enthusiastic	Being part of the group and of the extraordinary development within the community	<i>“It was exciting. There was incredible solidarity. [...] how it forged people together, young, old, seniors”</i> (association expert 1). <i>“[...] everyone was on our side [...]”</i> (Farmer 4, FDFFA).
Powerful	Feeling of power, taking an active role	<i>“It was indeed amazing, and above all, not to be defenseless any more, but to demonstrate to the creamery it could be different”</i> (Farmer 8, GFA).
Genuine	Avoiding loss of face, keep one’s standing in front of others	<i>“I can’t say, I will continue to milk; [...] I would be cease to be credible, beyond recovery”</i> (Farmer 4, FDFFA).
Sense of justice	Fear about distortion of competition, eager for high participation in the community	<i>“I was very glad that our direct neighbor participated, simply to eliminate a certain distortion of the competition [...]”</i> (Farmer 10, FDFFA & GFA).

Decision-Making of the Pressured Group to Participate in the Strike

The farmers in the pressured group either took part in the milk strike under pressure fulltime or at least part of the time. The pressure exercised included strike control, threats of terminating business relationships, and disputes within families. Dairy farmers of this group who participated felt they gave in to peer pressure. They reported, for example, verbal abuse, hate mail, threats, strike control through following of milk collection trucks, and the termination of supply relationships. As a result, several farmers participated in the end phase of the milk delivery strike:

“There was indeed a certain pull, a certain pull effect was definitely part of it, and then for many that had a hard time deciding, they thought then, yeah well, if I do not participate now, then I will be left standing alone, and, therefore, I participate too” (Farmer 7, FDFA).

Many farmers of the pressured group described emotional distress. They felt forced by convinced FDFA members toward a decision to participate in the milk strike, as this statement from one of the experts illustrates:

“There was pressure exercised on people, also as mass pressure, [...] and there was this black-and-white theme; you can only be for us or against us, and there is nothing in-between. [...] and this group pressure, I have experienced as really devastating” (Conflict expert 1).

In addition to the pressure by FDFA supporters, other groups also exerted pressure on farmers’ decision-making process. The pressure in the communities resulted in discussions within the wider families of the farmers.

“Within the family, the pressure was rather high, from relatives too, and former farm managers. [...] other family members [...], they even said, they pay the milk money to me, just to, well, protect the [family] name” (Farmer 5, GFA).

As actions to influence and convince dairy farmers to participate in the strike, in particular, continuous threats were reported. Threatening actions included break-ins with opening of milk containers by other farmers, traitor slogans sprayed on houses, and illegal drugs left on milk containers. GFA officials described threats of mass membership resignations, if they would not participate personally in the milk strike. Due to the increasing pressure many farmers in this group felt forced into actions to protect themselves, which included the participation in the milk strike.

Altogether, farmers in the pressured group named a wide variety of perceptions concerning their decision-making. A recurring perception was the wish to demonstrate solidarity, which was closely connected to the personal goal of preserving their standing within the community. Further perceptions triggered by the pressure exercised from FDFA members were fear and an inability to cope with the situation. Many GFA farmers were concerned to lose their standing in the community or with other farmers, if they did not participate in the milk strike. They were afraid of endangering long-term relationships with other farmers, and were torn between family conflicts concerning their participation. A conflict between the older and the younger generation

was quoted by the older generation. Many of them were against the milk strike, and mainly against the destruction of food. Their main arguments were based on their personal experiences during the war and periods of food shortage. Typically the younger generation was more enthusiastic about the milk strike as a more radical protest form compared to banners or demonstrations. A majority of informants described negative perceptions with respect to the pressured group, such as threatened or controlled. Table 4 provides an overview of the perceptions that were reported repeatedly as reasons to temporarily participate in the milk strike under pressure.

Table 4. Pressured farmers' perceptions regarding the decision process to participate in the strike

Perception	Definition	Statements
Solidary	Wish to demonstrate solidarity	<i>"And then, naturally, there has been a large share that were not members of the FDFFA. They participated then out of solidarity. This group was not very small, but rather many. [...] Those who participated out of solidarity, they say now, once and never again" (Farmer 10, FDFFA & GFA).</i>
Afraid	Unable to cope with the pressure, overwhelmed by the situation	<i>"[...] it was the worst time I have ever experienced in my life. [...] and then I had a couple of calls, which were less great, from female farmers who were crying on the phone said they were threatened [...]" (Farmer 1, GFA).</i>
Threatened	Felt threatened due to not participating in the milk strike	<i>"[...] they threatened children in school, if one did not participate in the boycott. [...] My colleague [name] who worked here at the time, he had received a death threat by a FDFFA radical" (Association Expert 4).</i>
Controlled	Strike posts controlling where the milk truck picked up milk	<i>"And so, I followed the milk truck, and said, come on, it is milk strike, we are doing it together. And everybody stuck to it" (Farmer 12, FDFFA).</i>
Concerned	Concerned about avoiding loss of one's standing in the community	<i>"In the village, you are going to live your life. For what I should fight against each other, or for what should I be at war with one another; that achieves nothing" (Farmer 4, FDFFA). "If you lose reputation, that is the older one is, the more difficult it is afterwards" (Dairy Expert 5).</i>
Anxious	Anxious to maintain relationships with customers and business partners	<i>"[...] I will pour the milk as well for two days, because, I do not want to completely mess up the relationship with my neighbor [...]" (Dairy Expert 5). "I know someone [...] who claimed that for someone who is not participating, he does not work anymore" (Association Expert 1).</i>
Torn between	Conflicts within families, between generations	<i>"There were indeed families with intense disputes, between husband and wife, but even more between the older and the younger generation" (Farmer 1, GFA).</i>

Decision-Making of the Pressured Group to not Participate in the Strike

The pressured group also includes a subgroup of farmers who did not participate in the milk strike despite the pressure. According to the informants interviewed, the major reasons to not participate in the milk strike were economic and ethical reasons and also the overall belief that the strike will not be successful, respectively is not meaningful. Economic reasons to not participate in the milk strike were a disagreement with the FDFFA demands and a management

focus on farm growth. According to the informants, farmers of this group hesitated to breach the contract with their creameries. Especially with respect to the second milk strike, several interviewees specified that based on their experience of frustration during the first strike, they did not want to participate a second time.

“[...] if I have an existing contract, this contract exists between two contractual partners [...], and then, well, essentially I cannot breach the contract” (Farmer 6, GFA).

“I will not strike against my own enterprise [Cooperative Creameries]” (Policy Expert 1, referring to the decision-making on the dairy farm of her husband).

For several dairy farmers, their financial situation did not allow the participation in the milk strike. Because of bank loans, they felt they needed the money from the milk delivery and strike participation was not an option.

“They simply could not afford it due to financial reasons [...]” (Association Expert 1).

In addition to the economic reasons, ethical reasons played a role in the decision to not participate in the milk strike. Specifically, farmers mentioned their reluctance to destroy food.

“Well, the pouring of milk that is a big challenge for many” (Association Expert 1).

“[...] you can imagine, if one does the work, and then one is opening the milk-tap and has to watch. That simply hurts the heart. There goes the daily work. One has to emotionally bear this. And second, financially one has to also bear it. That are several 100 € for a larger dairy farm, every day” (Farmer 9, GFA).

Another group of non-participating farmers were convinced that the milk strike would not be successful, hence from their point of view a participation made no sense.

“[...] and if one says this cannot work, from my perspective, then one has to distance oneself” (Farmer 5, GFA).

Discussion

Starting with the exit decision with respect to the GFA, the discussion section recollects the main findings of the preceding analysis and contrasts them with the research literature, as well as the EVL theory. The exit decision is also put into the context of the decision to join the FDFA. Furthermore, the strike participation decision, which seems to have been even more emotionalized and subject to peer pressure than the exit decision, is discussed in the context of the GFA policy.

Characteristic of the convinced group was the GFA exit, which was often linked to joining the FDFA and participation in the milk delivery strike. Some members of the convinced group perceived their exit as implicit voice to make the GFA aware of their dissatisfaction regarding the lack of cooperation with the FDFA. Overall, voice in form of feedback was missing or

mainly destructive. Even when GFA officials made an effort to claim feedback from resigning members concerning their exit reasons, they were ignored or not answered in a constructive manner. At the time, GFA attempts to win back former members often failed or provoked resistance. Thus, destructive voice from the convinced group dominated the feedback to the GFA. The level of loyalty from the convinced group towards the GFA was low, due to the decreasing belief that the GFA would support the FDFA and its requests (e.g., minimum price, flexible quota system).

The perceived options for farmers of the pressured group regarding GFA exit included pressured exit and silent withdrawal from exit. These two groups rarely showed any voice function, and their loyalty to the GFA was not displayed in public. They hesitated to publicly commit themselves to the position of the GFA towards the milk quota and the milk delivery strike. The pressured farmers reduced feedback due to social reasons, such as preserving reputation, justifying themselves in the local community, and the perceived peer pressure. They also strived to maintain relationships with FDFA farmers.

The passive loyalty and missing voice are closely related. Passive loyalty reinforced the lack of voice and led to even more passive loyalty. The reasons lay in a fear of becoming visibly personally involved in the conflict, the pressure exercised, and the public opinion against the GFA. Furthermore, within farm families the interaction between emotionality and rationality is important to understand the situation. During the conflict the family decision-making was subject of intensive discussions, especially concerning the possible effects on the standing of everyone in the family within the community. Often farmers had to weigh their own standpoint against harmony within the family, with the other generation (predecessors or successors), and among business partners. This balancing act was reflected in actions of pressured farmers to silently withdraw from the GFA exit, decrease their public voice, or participate temporarily in the strike.

Regarding the strike participation, perceptions analyzed differed critically between the convinced group and the pressured group. The differences between perceptions reflect the differences in the decision-making processes. In the convinced group, positive perceptions dominated (e.g., curious, enthusiastic, powerful). The decision-making of the pressured group was marked by negative perceptions (e.g., threatened, controlled, concerned). These perceptions resulted from the impact of actions by FDFA members, including threats, visits, and strike controls. The impact level depended on the personality of the farmer and the personal, emotional environment.

Within this study two major decision-making processes were considered: the decision to exit the GFA and the decision to participate in the milk strike. These two decision processes were considered separately, but there are parallels between both. For the convinced group, the exit decision was typically linked with the strike decision, because the strike was a key request of the FDFA and not supported by the GFA, which in turn was one major reason for leaving the GFA. The pressured group felt coerced to leave the GFA and to participate in the milk strike. Exit from the GFA was not always linked with joining the FDFA, even for the convinced group, but the majority of exiting farmers joined the FDFA.

Based on the analysis of the interviews conducted, four options regarding association membership were realized, two options involving GFA exit, (i) exiting without joining the FDFA

and (ii) exiting and then joining the FDFFA, and two options without GFA exit, (iii) not exiting but still joining the FDFFA and (iv) not exiting and not joining the FDFFA. According to the informants, the most commonly realized option was (ii) exiting and then joining the FDFFA. This study focused on the exit decision and not on the decision to join the FDFFA. However, the results lead to the proposition that some exit reasons are also important entry reasons. Common reasons were the strong appeal of the FDFFA vision and demands, as well as the fear of change. Furthermore, existential problems related to the abolishment of the dairy milk quota were relevant in both decisions. The abolishment was supported by the GFA, whereas the FDFFA promised to fight for a preservation of the quota. Regarding the strike participation, it is remarkable that many GFA members participated in the milk strike. The inhibition threshold to participate in the strike seems considerably lower than to exit the GFA. Possibly the pressure concerning the strike decision was more potent and direct.

In this context, data on the actual scope of membership loss would be interesting, but is difficult to estimate. The GFA did not publish official numbers concerning the membership loss during the milk conflict. Experts assess that the nationwide loss of members was not dramatic; but regional impacts, including the exit of whole local committees, were definitely considerable. Informants believe that a majority of former members came back to the GFA. Meanwhile the FDFFA has lost influence, despite the current re-ignition of the milk price debate. The disillusioning results of the two milk strikes led to passive and frustrated FDFFA members who were resigning their memberships. Except if the prices were to drastically drop again, it would be difficult for the FDFFA to recover. The FDFFA seems to have ceased to be considered a viable alternative for many dairy farmers. Since the end of the milk conflict the development of the milk market is characterized by ongoing structural changes, milk price fluctuation, and overall decreasing milk prices.

Several results of prior studies were reaffirmed by the results of this research. Feindt's (2010) description of farmers' behavior in crisis situations (e.g., transfer of responsibility, blaming) were also identified in the convinced group's decision-making. The farmers held politicians and GFA officials accountable for their uncertain future prospects. Coser (1972) mentioned higher participation rates in small group actions, which could be an explanation for the extraordinary high engagement of FDFFA members during the milk conflict. Besides, group affiliation and trust were identified as foremost reasons for the high involvement of FDFFA members. They could personally identify themselves with the FDFFA demands. Valdez (2012) reported activists stating income loss and similar concerns as motivations to protest, but not as the main basis for the ability to organize. The current study also points to economic concerns as the initial impetus. But similar to Valdez's group dynamics and structural reorganization of cooperatives, this study finds peer pressure and the availability of an alternative association as important factors in farmers' decision-making processes during the milk conflict.

Hirschman emphasized in the EVL theory the importance of a balanced mixture of inert and alert customers for an organization. The analysis of the milk conflict showed that the mixture was not balanced in the case of the GFA. The GFA was struggling with a rising amount of alert members, and therefore was strained to change. Another aspect of Hirschman's theory relevant for this study is the description of organizational decision-making in order to estimate the impact of quality change on different groups of members or customers. This parallels the dilemma of the

GFA concerning the positioning during the milk conflict on three major issues, whether to oppose the abolishment of the dairy milk quota, to support the FDFA demands (e.g., minimum milk price), and to support the milk delivery strike. For all three aspects, the membership base was divided. Initially, the GFA had decided to not become active regarding any of the three issues. However, during the milk strike, parts of the GFA supported it temporary due to high personal pressure. The GFA policies affected the decision-making of the dairy farmers extensively, and split farmers into two groups, the convinced group and the pressured group, and more generally FDFA supporters and non FDFA supporters.

The GFA management was faced with the challenge to position the GFA towards the critical issues stated above. Regarding the abolishment of the dairy milk quota, the association supported the already enacted measure, knowing that the decision would cause dissatisfaction, especially among small-scale dairy farmer. The dissatisfaction in combination with the possibility of an alternative association, the FDFA as supporter of the milk quota, has contributed to the increasing number of exits. The strategy of the GFA was oriented towards the long-term, despite the awareness of possible short-term repercussions. The strategy came with the disadvantage of not being able to prevent temporary exits and deescalate the conflict at an early stage.

Grima and Glayman (2012) described a rising likelihood of exit based on a decline in income, as well as the existence of alternatives. Interviewed farmers mentioned as most important exit reasons the existence of the FDFA, as well as the disappointment with the milk price and, hence, the negative income development. Kolarska and Howard (1980) emphasized the relationship between the likelihood of exit and the belief in performance improvement. Parallels can be seen in the quantity and quality of voice of the convinced group. They started with constructive feedback and clear demands, but with the insight that the GFA would not fulfill their demands, dairy farmers of the convinced group changed to destructive feedback and exited the GFA.

In Hirschman's fundamental work developing the EVL theory, he related exit to the economic sector and voice to the political sector. Based on this study, the dichotomy suggested by Hirschman should be called into question. Based on this study, the limitation of the exit category to the economic sector limits the applicability of the theory unnecessarily. Exit as part of the EVL theory helps to explain the decline in association membership by describing the outcome of a decision-making process, as the analysis shows. Similarly, voice, which is indispensable for political actors and also for production companies with respect to their customers, becomes increasingly important, promoted by the social media environment. Evidently, voice is also a critical factor for organizational development processes, and a major factor in conflict prevention within organizations.

Conclusions

The study was based on Hirschman's (1970) EVL theory, which initially focused on consumers' decision-making with respect to companies and their products. Within this study the model is transferred to the agricultural sector, and applied to associations and the decision-making of their members. The study analyzes farmers' decision-making during the highly emotionalized milk conflict, including farmers' developing perceptions. These perceptions were identified and discussed in the context of how different groups of farmers (convinced, pressured) were affected

differently. With regard to the exit decision of dairy farmers to resign their GFA membership, the exit category of the EVL theory was modified. The differentiated exit category consists of convinced exit and pressured exit, and the additional element of silent withdrawal from exit. The voice category also was differentiated into the subcategories of voluntary voice, claimed voice, and missing voice. The loyalty category remained unchanged compared to the basic EVL theory.

The study's aim was not to focus on conflict patterns and conflict management, but to provide a deeper insight into the decision-making of dairy farmers in conflict situations and in the context of peer pressure. Overall, it can be ascertained that the decision-making of GFA members during the conflict was influenced by peer pressure and by decreasing loyalty (or a change from active to passive loyalty), when personal disadvantages occurred. The personal situation had a higher priority than to support the GFA and show active loyalty. The FDFA was able to use peer pressure and the passive loyalty towards the GFA in their measures to influence the decision-making, especially in the case of undecided dairy farmers. The FDFA actions affected first the loyalty levels, and then also the exercise of voice. Several informants compared the emotionalization of the FDFA movement during the height of the milk conflict to the historical period of the Third Reich in Germany. Some informants went even further with the analogy. The analogy symbolizes the high emotional charge during the conflict, and the aspects of peer pressure as central to farmers' decision-making.

Associations and other membership based organizations may learn from the following aspects of the conflict analyzed. Communication is essential for achieving active loyalty and to motivate members to improve the organization through active voice. Possibly, a change from a top-down communication approach to a more base-oriented approach can help with managing member communications. Even, in professional organizations, the management must not underestimate the importance of an emotional appeal to the member base.

As Fassnacht et al. (2010) point out, the agricultural sector is characterized by family businesses, which results in the co-existence of emotionality and rationality. The insights gained from farmers' perceptions can serve as guidance for representatives and management to improve their understanding of farmers' decision-making under pressure. Based on the findings, addressing fear and other emotions could be improved by offering more options for members to exchange their opinions and discuss different perspectives. For example, more workshops and other opportunities for exchange through joint activities with the members can serve trust and relationship building, as well as improve the discovery of early warning signs of upcoming crises. The introduction of internal voting polls or working groups on current topics could be a variant to achieve a broader consents and commitment concerning controversial points and to identify upcoming issues.

Overall, communication with the member base should take a broad approach, including info mailings, chats, online blogs, and own video clips to speed up the communication process. An opportunity for further exchange can be provided by more extensively using the existing online communication platforms for member discussions. The goal of this approach is a shift from passive members to more actively involved members, which can have a positive effect on loyalty levels. In that case, at least one association representative must be the responsible contact partner

and monitor the discussion closely. This type of involvement requires training in online communication and a considerable amount of resources.

Furthermore, associations or other organizations should train authorized personal as conflict experts for specific topics or generally in conflict management, in order to be better prepared for conflict situations. Another effect would be the opportunity of identifying potential conflict issues early, in the initiation phase, when a factual discussion is still possible and interventions to decrease exit and destructive voice are more likely to succeed. Different strategies could be prepared in advance and upcoming changes in important policy regulations could be assessed in a timely manner. Based on the modified EVL theory, it can be useful for organizations to structure the feedback received based on the subcategories during different stages of a conflict or dispute in order to get a better overview of the development of the situation. Building on this knowledge actions can be initiated, for example, an official statement or convening an extraordinary general meeting. This systematic approach would help to structure the conflict response, and provide insights in the members' behavior, as well as possible consequences.

The milk conflict offers many opportunities for research, and therefore not every aspect could be covered in detail. Further analysis, for example concerning the market channels of striking farmers (cooperative or privately owned creamery) would add an additional perspective concerning the decision-making and possible impact of the membership in a cooperative creamery. Several experts interviewed emphasized the emotionality of the conflict and the irrational action of farmers to strike against their own cooperative. Based on the detailed analysis of the data collected in this study, the majority of farmers interviewed mentioned that they were not primarily focusing on their creamery, whether cooperatively owned or otherwise. They emphasized to have the bigger picture in mind, which included to increase pressure on politicians and gain media attention through empty supermarket shelves. Another interesting aspect mentioned by many informants was that the GFA, and especially the president at the time, as the highest representative of the umbrella organization impacted the decision-making of farmers in the state associations, despite in some cases different approaches by the presidents on state levels. Overall, the presidents of both the GFA and the FDFFA played a major role during the conflict.

Future research can build on the explicated broader range of subcategories of exit and voice in order to develop measurement models. Furthermore, the developed differentiation into subcategories is a suitable starting point to compare the exit decision among different groups, including consumers, association members, and others, to identify commonalities and differences. Further research could analyze parallels between this and other conflicts in the agribusiness sector in order to estimate to which extent, and how the lessons drawn from this conflict can be applied to other conflicts. The comparison could result in more general theory development. There are several historical and recent conflicts in the agribusiness sector to explore in more detail, and potentially suitable for a comparison, including the recent Brazilian trucking conflict and the port slowdown in the western U.S. by the dockworker union. As is typical for qualitative research, a further comparison would exceed the in-depth analysis provided in this study. In general, qualitative studies offer lessons learned to their readers, but results are not generalizable to other populations or instances of the phenomenon researched. However, qualitative research contributes to theory development, which is then available to

future research, as well as to managers and other actors in the field to choose to apply. Different from quantitative research, in qualitative research the decision whether the extent of similarity between sending and receiving context warrants transferability to the new context shifts to the potentials user (Bitsch 2005: 85).

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the Konrad-Adenauer Foundation for partially funding this research project. This publication was supported by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the Technische Universität München within the funding program Open Access Publishing.

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Appendix. Interview Guide (Farmers)

Relevant interviewee information

- Farm size and structure, overall structure in the region
- Age, education, volunteer respectively political involvement
- Membership in the GFA / FDFA and other organizations

Perception of the dairy conflict

- Trigger factors and initial conflict signs
- Conflict pattern and possible causes for this conflict
- Level of dissatisfaction and fear of change
- Role of GFA and FDFA within this conflict
- Personal standpoint towards the dairy conflict
- Important involved persons

Opinion formation towards a participation in the milk strike

- Development steps of the decision to participate / not participate in the milk strike
- Causes and influencing factors
- Own opinion towards the results of the dairy conflict
- Own insights and terminations based on the milk strike
- Decision-making within the own family
- Participation in a future dairy conflict
- Impact on the opinion formation, opinion leader

Exit and conflict aftermath

- Relationship towards farmer colleagues, neighbors
- Estimation of the development within the association structure
- Exit and reentry (reasons, motivation, obstacles)

Association structure

- Expectations of the associations
- Optional measurements to deescalate the conflict
- Reasons for an association exit respectively moving away from someone
- Dealing with emotions of the two involved associations
- Recognized reactions and changes from the GFA and FDFA
- Communalities between both, wish for changes, image

