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The agricultural policy trilemma: On the wicked nature of agricultural policy making

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural policy has been seen as exceptional, compartmentalized and complex. Consequently, policy making in agriculture has been portrayed as particularly difficult – sometimes as an example of a ‘wicked problem’. In this paper I argue that agricultural policy is more than ‘just’ a complex and wicked problem. It tends to be inbuilt contradictions in the form of trilemmas in agricultural policymaking, which imply that some combinations of core goals are impossible to reach. In this article I develop and illustrate the concept of an agricultural policy trilemma with Norway as a case – a plausibility probe. I argue that the concept of a trilemma may be a useful analytical tool in analysing policy and shifting policy priorities. I describe the development, and workings, of the trilemma from the 1970’s to the beginning of the corona crisis in 2020.

1. Introduction

Agricultural policy is often portrayed as complex and compartmentalized. It addresses food production, farmers’ welfare, rural and regional development, landscape conservation and more. In the Norwegian agricultural policy community, variations over a joke on the complexity of agricultural policy was repeatedly told over a period of at least 20 years. It stated that the agricultural policy was so complicated that only God the Almighty and the Secretary General of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, Per Harald Grue, who worked in the Ministry from 1972 to 2009 (Hompland, 2009, Grue, 2014a, b), understood it – and that God hasn’t been seen for a while. After Grue’s retirement in 2009, the joke’s last paragraph changed to: – and now Grue too has left. As many good jokes, this one has both an element of truth, and of tragedy; the truth being that the policy is indeed complex, while the tragedy is that those of us who are still trying to figure out the intriguing puzzles of agricultural policy have to do so without much hope of illumination from above.

What we need in situations like this, are clarifying concepts and ways to approach the problematic policy field at hand. In this article I argue that part of the complexity of agricultural policy can be seen as a certain set of in-built contradictions – a policy trilemma – that make policy making particularly problematic and ‘wicked’. This is then a conceptual scheme for interpreting and categorizing the complex decisions facing agricultural policy makers. I develop and test my argument on a particular case: Norwegian agricultural policy between 1975 and 2020 – in the early days of the coronavirus crisis.

In terms of agriculture, Norway is an exceptional case. Norway is a scattered, northern, scarcely populated, high-cost welfare state. This means that labour and land are scarce while capital is relatively abundant (Forbord and Vik, 2017). The agricultural structure is relatively small-scale, based on family farms, with an average farm unit of around 25 ha (Statistics Norway, 2019b), where around 50 percent of the agricultural land is rented (Forbord et al., 2014). Furthermore, agricultural production is oriented towards the domestic market. The Norwegian agricultural policy model consists of five key elements (Almås, 2016): i) high trade barriers on key products; ii) a high level of direct farm payments negotiated annually between the government and the farmers’ organizations; iii) corporative market arrangements around key production areas such as dairy and meat; iv) a strictly regulated market for farm properties; and v) a geographically distributed production structure that is regulated by a mixture of support schemes and quota regulations – the so-called ‘canalisation policy’ (Mahlum Mélès, 2019). Through this model of highly regulated agricultural policy, politicians and stakeholders seek to obtain a multifaceted set of goals.

Although the Norwegian case is idiosyncratic, the type of considerations policy makers must make are not unique to the Norwegian case. The concept of an agricultural policy trilemma addresses generic problems that arise when political ambitions for land use stretch beyond basic food production. The agricultural sectors in much of the developed world try to balance their ambitions on efficient food production and food security, rural livelihood and development, with improved farmer
welfare and more (e.g. Daugbjerg and Swinbank, 2012). However, sometimes these goals are contradictory. The concept of an agricultural policy trilemma, developed and demonstrated in this article, helps us to make sense of the choices and decisions in a policy landscape marked by wicked problems and contradictory goals.

The article has the following structure: First, I outline the method and data used in the article. Thereafter, I present a theoretical back- ground of wicked problems and trilemmas, before describing how the trilemma came into being in the Norwegian case and drawing a few lines to developments elsewhere. Thereafter I clarify the elements of the agricultural trilemma in the case of Norwegian agricultural policy, and describe how the trilemma has played out in Norwegian agricultural policy between 1974 and the current crisis following the outbreak of the corona pandemic.

2. Materials and methods

Methodically, this article offers an interpretive case study (Lijphart, 1971) of Norwegian agricultural policy from 1974 to 2020, where I aim to illustrate the usefulness of the term ‘the agricultural policy trilemma’. Thus, the case study is also what Eckstein calls a ‘plausibility probe’ (Eckstein, 1975; Moses and Knutsen, 2019). The procedure is that I first describe the theoretical backdrop for the study of wicked problems in general, and trilemmas more specifically. Then I use the term trilemma as an interpretive framework for the development of Norwegian agricultural policy. To do this, I have collected and analysed policy documents. I have used 12 public documents such as Norwegian Official Reports (NOUs), Parliamentary Reports (white papers), Parliamentary Proposals from 1974 to 2017, and other Government strategy documents. The documents are in various ways important for the policy development in the sector. The NOUs are reports – ordered by the government – summarizing the situation and/or the knowledge status in a certain field – often written by appointed experts with the aid of employees in the relevant ministries. The Parliamentary Reports describe the Government’s analysis of a policy field and suggested policy direc- tion – but without an attached proposal to the Parliament. Due to a mainly consensus-oriented parliamentary system, Norwegian Parlia- mentary Reports are central in the policy making processes. These Reports and the following debate in the Parliament normally have a substantial influence on policy making in the years to come. The Parlia- mentary Proposals contain the Government’s propositions for the budget and/or new or changed laws, and in the case of budgetary changes also the latest negotiation between the Government and the two farmer organizations. In Norwegian agricultural policy making, the tradition is that a new Parliamentary Report is made approximately every ten years (see e.g. Farsund, 2014). In addition to the governmental documents, I use secondary sources and data from key figures that have studied or described the history and development of Norwegian agricultural policy during the current period (Grue, 2014a, 2014b; Almås, 2002). Finally, I have used various available sources on the measures taken in the early days of the corona crisis in Norway, from March to May 2020.

3. The theoretical background – Wicked problems and trilemmas

One reason that agricultural policy is considered so complex lies in the notion of the exceptionalism of agricultural policy. As Grace Skog- stad wrote: The idea that agriculture is a sector unlike any other eco- nomic sector, and, as such, warrants special government support was the original raison d’être for the development of the state assisted paradigm in the USA and Europe’ (Skogstad, 1998, p. 467). Exceptionalism thus implies that agricultural policy, both nationally and globally, needs special attention and treatment, as e.g. government intervention in the form of protective legislation and high subsidies (Grant, 1995; Skogstad, 1998; Daugbjerg and Swinbank, 2008). The combination of a complex and a highly compartmentalized policy field has made agriculture a fertile ground for public policy theorizing. Daugbjerg and Swinbank (2012) present a convincing overview of some of this literature. Recent studies analysing agricultural policy changes have asked whether we now see a ‘post-exceptionalist’ epoque (Daugbjerg and Feindt, 2017; Greer, 2017). Daugbjerg and Feindt (2017, p. 1567) describe post-exceptionalism as 

...a partial departure from compartmentalized, exclusive and ex-ceptionalist policies and politics which, however, preserves some ex-ceptionalist features and has not led to a complete transformation to market-oriented and performance-based policies. It is an incomplete transformation of ideas, institutions, interest constellations and policies with a significant legacy from past policy.

The partial departure from exceptionalism and the interlinking of agricultural policy with policy fields such as food policy, rural develop-ment, energy policy, environmental policy, and so on, may have reduced the compartmentalized nature of the policy field, but certainly not the complexity.

Yet, in general, policy and politics are not easy. It is therefore not surprising that a research literature has emerged in situations where it is difficult – or sometimes practically impossible – to formulate good policy. The article by Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, ‘Dilemmas in a general theory of planning’ (Rittel and Webber, 1973) marked the start of a long lasting research tradition addressing various wicked problems in many sectors (Head, 2019), including agricultural policy (Kuhmonen, 2018; Morath, 2015). Wicked problems share several characteristics, e.g., that they are complex, cannot be formulated unambiguously, solutions can never be defined as right or wrong, only more or less good. Furthermore, wicked problems are unique and most often symptoms of other problems. Not least, the understanding of the nature of wicked problems is largely dependent on the solution envis-aged. Taken together, this means that: ‘[w]icked problems escape simple and final solutions and form an interconnected “jam”, where each res-olution generates a cascade of new problems and collateral damages’ (Kuhmonen, 2018, p. 683).

The concept of ‘wicked problems’ has met some critique in recent years though. Peters (2017) argues that the use of the term is subject to ‘conceptual stretching’, in that many use the concept of policy chal- lenges that are problematic, but do not really meet the criteria described by the original model. Termeer et al. (2019) write that the term tends to lead to either paralysis or an excessive belief in what to do with a wicked problem. They further suggest that one can move further in the field by developing more analytically precise concepts (Termeer et al., 2019, p. 167). This article is an attempt to do exactly that. By developing con-ceptual tools to address the inbuilt contradictions, dilemmas, and trilemmas within the policy field, we may try to untangle what causes the wickedness of policy fields.

The concept of a policy trilemma is a specification of a wicked sit-uation in policy making. A trilemma describes a situation of funda-mentally conflicting policy goals. Conflicting goals are not unusual, but often occur in a situation where you either do not have the resources to go for everything you want at once and have to choose, and/or you have a situation where different parties have different priorities. A trilemma is something more. You have a trilemma when three political goals or conditions, each of which may be politically attractive, relate to each other in such a way that any two of them can be achieved, which in turn renders the third impossible to reach. The best-known trilemma from the literature is maybe the classic monetary trilemma (Mundell, 1963a,b), also known as the un-holy trinity (Cohen, 2000). This trilemma states that you cannot have (1) a fixed exchange rate, (2) capital mobility and (3) national (independent) monetary policy at the same time. You can have any two of them, but this will then contradict the third. Another example from the field of economics is the financial trilemma (Schoenmaker, 2011) which states that you cannot have financial sta-bility, financial integration, and national financial policies at the same time.
Related to policies of agriculture and food, several studies have addressed the 'food, energy and environment trilemma' (Tilman et al., 2009; Harvey and Pilgrim, 2011; Steinbuks and Hertel, 2016) where a key point is that current drives towards an increased use of cultivated land for both food and energy purposes is likely to increase the agricultural carbon footprint – you cannot have more food, more bioenergy from agricultural land, AND reduced carbon footprints.

Thus, the concept of a trilemma has been used to frame a specific set of conflicting goals, thereby facilitating analyses and sense-making of policy in such situations. This is also what the agricultural policy trilemma can be used for. I will emphasise though, that a policy trilemma is a theoretical concept and an analytical tool that neither exists prior to policy making, nor analyses of policy. Yet, it may be fruitful for analyses of certain political situations. In the following section I will describe how the combined set of goals, that can be described as a trilemma, came into being in the Norwegian case.

4. The becoming of the Norwegian agricultural policy trilemma

Current agricultural policy and goals are results of historical developments and political choices. The agricultural policy trilemma I address result from the combined evolution of policy goals on i) increasing productivity, ii) stable production levels, and iii) a stabilizing agricultural – or farm – structure.

The first goal – the goal of increased productivity – has been an expressed part of Norwegian agricultural policy since WWII (Almås, 2002, pp. 97–146). Productivity growth was a prerequisite for industrialization and the rebuilding of the country after the war. The countryside had to release labour to the growing industrial sectors. From the early 1970s, it also became an explicit means to increase the income of farm families (Grue, 2014a, p. 79). The goal of increased productivity has, to varying degrees, been part of the policy in the years that followed. Helped by technological developments, productivity has increased. Forbord et al. (2014) state that the number of active farmers has declined with around 3 percent annually, and that labour productivity has risen correspondingly. However, using technological development and increased productivity as means of income improvement actualizes the inherent dilemma of Cochrane (1958) treadmill theory. This theory outlines how farmers that seek to improve their income by adopting new technology may experience a short-term profit increase, but as more farmers adopt the new technology, production rises, prices drop, and the increased profit vanishes. Thus, farmers have to keep running the treadmill of increasing productivity just to keep their profits. At the aggregated level, the effect is both that fewer and fewer farmers produce the same amount of goods, each of them on more land (Levins and Cochrane, 1996), and that unless enough farmers quit, overproduction will be the result. This is a development seen across advanced economies and is closely related to the second goal in the trilemma.

The second goal – the goal of stable production – has been in and out of the policy focus since the 1930s. Then, local overproduction and uneven distribution of the production urged farmers to form producer cooperatives. The overproduction problem re-emerged in the 1950s (NOU, 1974: 26; St. Meld. nr 14 (1976–1977)), but were kept in check by the so-called ‘canalization policy’. This is a set of evolving policy instruments put in place to secure a regional differentiation and division of labour in Norwegian agriculture (Almås, 2002, pp. 140–141). The aim was to secure the overall production level by steering different regions towards specialization in productions where they had comparative advantages. E.g. grain in the most advantageous regions in the central and south-eastern parts of Norway, and grass-based production such as milk and meat in the north, the narrow fjords, and in mountainous regions (Mahlum Melås, 2019). Yet, at the beginning of the 1980s, it had once again become clear that the ever-increasing productivity had led to overproduction (Grue, 2014a). For Norwegian farmers, there was neither a tradition for, nor an economy in an export-oriented agriculture. It was therefore necessary to do something to limit the production. Quotas, production-independent and graded subsidy rates, as well as market regulation under the control of the large farmer cooperatives, were used to regulate and keep production stable.

Yet, in the years after the establishment of the WTO agreement, agricultural imports have gradually increased. From 2000 to 2018 imports increased from 16.6 billion NOK to 66.5 billion NOK, while exports increased from 3.4 to 11.2 billion NOK (Stortinget, 2019). This implies that, relatively, the room for domestic production has been gradually shrinking, and thus, overproduction is approaching, even with little productivity growth. As was also observed in the EU and elsewhere, stabilizing and keeping production levels down became a core goal in agricultural policy making from the early 1980s. In the European community, Commissioner Mansholt warned about the danger of overproduction already at the Stresa conference in 1958, and by the early 1980s it was clear that measures had to be taken to reduce production (Pearne, 1997).

The third goal – the goal of a stable farm structure – has gradually grown into the Norwegian policy landscape. In the first years after WWII, structural development – fewer and larger farms – was a wanted development in agriculture (Almås, 2002; Grue, 2014a). Concerns about structural development going too far were raised in a key Norwegian Official Report, from the so-called Rural committee on agriculture from 1974 (NOU, 1974: 26, p. 275). It was, however, seen as a conditional concern. The attitude was that the speed of restructuring could be too high in some areas (Milde, 2019). In the report, increasing production was seen as an important measure to improve farmers’ income. The next time the issue was debated in an official report was in 1984 (NOU, 1984: 21). Here, the challenge of structural development in agriculture was built into the committee’s mandate (NOU, 1984: 21, p. 44). In one of the central annexes to the NOU, it is stated that:

‘Despite the fact that (…) agriculture had a sharp decline in employment during the decade 1970–1980, there was room for production growth. That is to say that production could increase in one part of the country, or a farm, without a corresponding reduction in others. This situation is now dramatically changed. (…) With an annual production growth of 3–4 per cent per employed person in agriculture, one must reduce the number of farms by 3000–4000 per year to avoid overproduction.’ (NOU, 1984: 21B, p. 196) (own translation)

From then on, the trilemma was in place in Norwegian agricultural policy. It is made clear that if one needs to avoid overproduction, a continued increase in productivity inevitably requires farm restructuring. As one issue was solved or improved, another was correspondingly compromised. These concerns have, at least rhetorically, been an element in all agricultural policy documents since.

In general terms, the agricultural policy trilemma I suggest here, consists of the following three goals (see Fig. 1):
i) Increasing productivity, which has been a goal of agricultural policies all over the globe at least since the post-WWII era, and continues to be a goal – and a tool – for increasing farm incomes and welfare;

ii) Fixed production levels, in the meaning that production had to be kept under a roof defined by domestic production (and accepted exports). This became a goal in many countries in the late 1980s due to re-occurring problems of overproduction, which in turn leads to severe market imbalances nationally and internationally, and;

iii) Stable farm structure, which has become a goal incorporated in agricultural policies in some countries due to increasing rural depopulation and an acceleration in farm restructuring.

In principle, any two of these goals are possible to obtain simultaneously, but then, the third is made impossible: First, if policy makers emphasize increasing productivity and fixed production levels, which is possible, this will contradict a stable farm structure – understood as a stable number of farms and farmers. Since the production levels are fixed (by a limited market), increased productivity will, with necessity, lead to fewer farms. Second, if policy makers emphasize increasing productivity, and at the same time a fixed farm structure, which is also possible, the aggregated production level will have to rise. If no export possibilities exist, the result will have to be overproduction. Third, if policy makers emphasize fixed production levels and a stable farm structure, which is also imaginable, this stands in contrast to increased productivity.

Analysing a policy field within the frame of a trilemma requires substantial simplifications and it is not self-evident that a policy-field – or parts of it – can be described as a trilemma. Trilemmas are logical constructs that may be used as analytical tools. Policy making, on the other hand, is about finding solutions. Thus, even though policy trilemmas point to impossibilities and inconsistencies, they are not iron cages. Daunt (2012) for instance expands on the logic of the monetary trilemma to speak of an ‘inconsistent quartet’, containing trade-offs between trade, trade exchange rates, capital controls, and domestic monetary policy. Thus, also the trilemma described here depicts principal contradictions, not natural laws. There are degrees of flexibility, it is possible to try to balance between the goals over time, and it is possible to try to cut through or overcome the inbuilt trilemmas. Even so, in political life, the contradictions need to be addressed. The usefulness of the trilemma concept lies in that it makes the trade-offs explicit. It makes the decisions (and the consequences thereof) clearer. It explicates why you can’t have your cake and eat it too.

In principle, policy makers may approach the described trilemma problem in several ways. First, policy makers may refuse to make such considerations and decide to withdraw from regulating the agricultural sector and leave these issues to the market. This is sometimes described as liberalization. However, due to tendencies for agricultural markets to develop into oligopolies and oligopolies, the de facto result is in most cases that the regulation is transferred from public to private actors. This may be the supermarkets as in the case of Australian chicken markets (Dixon, 1999), the internationalized cooperatives, as in the case of dairy in New Zealand (Burton and Wilson, 2012a,b), or the large meat processing industries, as in the case of the American chicken industry (Constance, 2008), or a mix, as in the case of the Norwegian chicken industry (Bjørkhaug et al., 2017a,b).

Second, a principally different alternative is to dodge the production limits by exporting the excessive production. This has been the preferred solution of several of the more export oriented agricultural producing countries, but is, under the current international trade regime, not available for small countries with a heavily subsidised agricultural sector – as e.g. the Norwegian case. However, another principal way to avoid the production limit is to try to steer farmers into new or additional productions or activities through diversification or pluriactivity. Examples are new additional farm activities like green care, rural services, rural tourism, bio-energy production etc. (e.g. Vik and McElwee, 2011). This is a set of solutions that escapes the limiting logic described above, but it is also a solution that changes, or expands, the concept of farming.

Third, when policy makers are reluctant to let go of their ambitions to manage the agricultural sector altogether, can’t export their way out of the problem, and don’t see the diversification strategies as realistic, they may choose to switch between goals, or to select one of the available combinations of goals, and accept the consequences of the goal they leave out, that is, balancing between goals over time.

All the above attempts to avoid the limiting nature of the trilemma may also be seen in light of the descriptions of changing agricultural-policy regimes. The concept of an agricultural regime is itself both in flux and contested (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989; Wilson, 2001, 2008; McMichael, 2009a,b). Yet, in terms of production orientation in agricultural policies, it has become customary to divide the post-war era into three periods: A productivist period from the end of WWII to the mid-1980s (Wilson, 2001; Ilbery and Bowler, 2014), that was replaced by a post-productivist, or multifunctional period, with a focus on diversification and pluriactivity (Ilbery, 1991; Wilson, 2001; Runninen et al., 2012), and a move from agricultural production to ‘consumption of countryside’ (Marsden et al., 1993). The food-price crisis in 2007/2008, marked a sudden shift towards a new interest in food security and sustainable intensification, sometimes labelled neo-productivism (Bjørkhaug et al., 2012a,b; Burton and Wilson, 2012a,b; Fish et al., 2013; Rosin, 2013; Wilson and Burton, 2015; Forfors and Vik, 2017). However, both globally and regionally, agricultural markets quickly ran into new problems of overproduction – most notably dairy production in key producing regions as e.g. the EU – from around 2015 (Pouch and Trouvé, 2018). The corona pandemic that spread throughout the world during the spring of 2020 quickly led to a new focus on national food security. Key producers of grain (Russia and the Ukraine) reduced or stopped their exports (Harvey, 2020; Medetsky and Durisin, 2020), and for a trade dependent country as Norway, this inevitably led to worries, and a new productivist sentiment.

Below, I will describe how the Norwegian agricultural policy trilemma has been handled in the years from the trilemmas manifestation in 1984 to the beginning of the current corona pandemic.

5. Shifting priorities – same trilemma

With the Rural Committee’s report (NOU, 1984: 21), the agricultural policy trilemma became a discursive reality. Agricultural policy aimed at continuing the increase in agricultural productivity, both as a goal in itself and as a tool to continue to improve farmers’ income and living conditions. At the same time, due to overproduction, it became a goal to keep the overall production stable. Preferably, this should be done at the same time as the structural rationalization in agriculture – especially in disadvantaged districts – should be slowed down or stopped. This was the trilemma that policy makers had to handle in the years thereafter.

5.1. Continued structural rationalization

Clearly though, the mid-1980s marked a shift, as structural rationalization became a key issue in the annual negotiations between the Government and the two organizations representing Norwegian farmers. The Government still placed great emphasis on productivity growth, but – especially from the Norwegian Farmer and Small Farmers’ Associations – there was a clear focus on farm structure and redistribution between different types of farms (Grue, 2014b). In 1987, for the first time, the Government signed the agricultural agreement exclusively with the Norwegian Farmer and Small Farmers’ Associations. The Farmers Union wished to continue to focus on farm income rather than structural redistribution and left the negotiations. However, already the following year, an agreement was signed between the Farmers Union and the Government, which was characterized by ‘several efficiency
In 1987, the Alstadheim Committee started work on a Norwegian Official Report, that finished in 1990 (NOU, 1991: 2B). This included a very thorough discussion of a number of fundamental agricultural policy themes. The Committee problematized that many fundamental, yet conflicting, goals were avoided in policy debates – and instead left to the annual agricultural negotiations:

A comprehensive agricultural policy requires a balance between different goals and considerations. Such trade-offs have not been explicitly addressed in previous agricultural policy documents. The balancing between different goals has thus been largely done in connection with the annual agricultural negotiations and the Parliaments’ treatment of the agreement. The Committee believes that this is unfortunate because it may set aside the longer-term perspectives for the more urgent tasks. (NOU, 1991: 2B, pp. 303–304 [own translation]).

However, there was a lot of fractioning and dissent in the committee. On many of the issues regarding production, productivity and structure, different opinions came from various majority and minority fractions and the committee could not come to agreement on these issues. Eventually, the government chose not to use the report as the basis for a legislative proposal, which would have been the normal procedure. Instead the Government came up with a separate Parliamentary Proposal (St. prp. nr 8 (1992–1993)). This proposition states that in order to achieve the goals the government has with agricultural policy in general, farmers must be guaranteed the opportunity for income and living conditions that are in line with the general population. This was seen to require steadily increasing productivity. The prioritising of productivity over stable structure also found support in the OECD’s recent criticism of Norwegian agricultural policy for ‘lacking structural adjustment’ (St. prp. nr 8 (1992–1993), p. 11).

The problems of overproduction were also directly targeted (St. prp. nr 8 (1992–1993), p. 30), as was the regional policy, but at the same time emphasis was put on the need to support and develop what was referred to as productive and rational farm units. Of the three goals in the trilemma, the goal of stable farm structure had to give way.

In 1999, a new Parliamentary Report was published by the Government (St. Meld. nr 19 (1999–2000)). This came after the signing of the WTO agreement in 1996, and the subsequent policy adaptations. However, the paper didn’t entail any clear-cut breach with previous years. The production and market balance considerations were largely the same. The paper also made it clear that, first and foremost the conditions of the most efficiently driven farms should be considered. It is said that “[t]he Government emphasises securing the basis for the farms with active agricultural production” (St. Meld. nr 19 (1999–2000), p. 111). In the Norwegian context, this is not about a general activity requirement, but a signal to prioritise the farmers that have agriculture as a main activity. A distinction is made between the small-scale farms and the farms which are suitable for professional farming, and it is said that ‘The Government will give priority to these types of farms in the design of the economic Instruments’ (St. Report No. 19 (1999–2000), p. 112). This, again, indicates that increasing productivity is significantly prioritised over having a stable farm structure, while the overall production is held stable.

However, the Government also made a point that other business activities – new rural industries – will become more important in order to achieve rural settlement and employment in the future. Under the heading ‘Strategies for rural development’ it is stated that: ‘In the future, new rural industries will be a necessary but not sufficient basis for maintaining settlement and employment in rural areas. Emphasis must therefore be placed on measures that, together with the primary industries, can help strengthen local communities’ (St. Report No. 19 (1999–2000), p. 114). The increasing focus on rural development and new businesses is a way to try to escape the limitations of the trilemma. By investing in alternative business activities and new markets related to the farm, but not limited by the same production roof as traditional agricultural products, one can try – in principle – to maintain farm structure even if one allows for both productivity increase, and fixed levels of (agricultural) production.

5.2. New rural businesses – and a sudden shift

In the years after the Parliamentary Report of 1999, the rural development strategies for new rural businesses gradually became more emphasised. A key document in the development of new rural industries as an agricultural policy strategy from the centre-right government was the White paper ‘Agriculture – more than agriculture. The Ministry of Agriculture and Food’s strategy for business development’ (Landbruks- og matdepartementet, 2005). ‘Agriculture Plus’ (Landbruks- og matdepartementet, 2005, p. 5) became a much-used term.

After the 2005 elections, the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party formed a new ‘red-green’ government. On one of his first appearances, at the annual meeting of the Norwegian Farmer and Small Farmers’ Associations, the new Minister of Agriculture and Food stated that ‘We have no more farms to lose’. Clearly though, concerns about the continued structural development were a key concern for the new government from the start. The Government also made its own strategy for rural development in the White Paper, ‘Take the land into use’ (Landbruks- og matdepartementet, 2007). The strategy states that the Government’s main objective for the work is ‘[A]n agricultural and food policy that contributes to active agriculture across the country. The policy should provide the basis for increased value creation and quality of life based on sustainable management of agriculture and rural resources’ (Landbruks- og matdepartementet, 2007, p. 7).

Thus, the political documents of the red-green government up to 2011, indicate a somewhat different approach to the trilemma. The emphasis on steadily increasing productivity is toned down, the production roof is the same, and attention to the negative structural development is stronger than previously. However, the solutions emphasised lie outside the confines of the trilemma. Continued income development for farmers, and stabilizing the structural development are to be obtained through new rural businesses and strategies to increase farmers value creation.

5.3. New productivism and back again

The international food price crisis in 2007/2008 changed the agricultural policy landscape across the world. Biofuel developments, population growth, crop failure in many countries due to climate change, as well as an increase in agricultural-related speculation contributed to a global price jump (Clapp and Helleiner, 2012; Conceicao and Mendoza, 2009; Headey, 2011; Robertson and Pinistrup-Andersen, 2010; Schneider et al., 2011). An FAO report suggested a need to increase production by as much as 70 percent by 2050, to keep pace with population growth (FAO - High-Level Expert Forum, 2009). Even though this has been problematized (Tomlinson, 2013), the general shift towards a new productivism was observable (Forbord and Vik, 2017; Wilson and Burton, 2015).

The neo-productive shift entered Norwegian agricultural policy with the red-green government’s Parliamentary Report from 2011, ‘Welcome to the table’ (Meld. St. 9 (2011–2012)). Here, there were four headlines for the agricultural policy objectives: food security, agriculture all over the country, increased value creation, and sustainable agriculture. The new productivist orientation came in relation to the goal of food security: an ambition to increase Norwegian food production in line with population growth, 20 percent in 20 years. This message changed the agricultural policy discourse from a focus on multifunctional agriculture under a constant threat of overproduction, to a situation where the challenge was to increase food production (Farsund and Daugbjerg, 2017; Forbord and Vik, 2017). Thus, a new window of opportunity had

1 Personal communication with Reidar Almås
Nevertheless, it laid a discursive foundation, and the productivist idea allowed for. Nevertheless, the emphasis on maintaining the farm placed on increased production and productivity as the new situation and even intensify productivity growth, and still not worry for the farm in-migration of labour slowed down. Third, Russia and Ukraine government, confirmed the main goals of the Report from 2011, but the quarantine regulation remained. Thereby, the future is diverse. Diversity is a prerequisite for, and a result of, agriculture growth at home stagnated (Tønnesen, 2018). Thus, the next agricultural Parliamentary Report on agriculture, this time from the conservative/- right government, confirmed the main goals of the Report from 2011, but made a key reservation in that ‘[t]he consumer demand provides the frame for the production opportunities’ (Meld. St. 11 (2016–2017), p. 9).

The new Parliamentary Report made it clear that the goal of increasing productivity prevails, while at the same time it is emphasized that the domestic market as well as the level of imports constitutes the framework for the overall production level. Regarding a stable structure, the white paper stated that ‘[t]he Government want strong and competitive agriculture in all parts of the country. Norwegian agriculture is diverse. Diversity is a prerequisite for, and a result of, agriculture all across the country, and it is therefore important that all farms exploit their potential’ (Meld. St. 11 (2016–2017), p. 9.) The formulations regarding farm structure are vague, and in a situation where the problem of overproduction once again has reoccurred, the trilemmatic balancing is back to the situation before the neo-productivist period: increasing productivity and stable production are prioritised over a stable farm structure.

5.4. Post-corona productivism?

During the spring of 2020 a new global crisis hit the world: the corona pandemic. There are different stories regarding the origin of the virus, but whether it stems from inside the confines of a laboratory or the odd practices of the Wuhan wet markets, it is likely to affect all kinds of agricultural markets for years to come. In Norwegian agriculture, it quickly became clear that the corona virus, or the policies to fight it, affected most parts of the agricultural sector. First, the social distancing policies forced restaurants to close, and those who had specialized in deliveries to those restaurants were seriously affected. Travelling and rural tourism were also negatively affected. The second effects reported were seen in the restrictions on the influx of foreign seasonal workers needed in the fruit and vegetable sector. The Government quickly lifted the in-migration restriction for foreign labour needed in the agriculture and prolonged the permission for those already in the country (Government, 2020), but the quarantine regulation remained. Thereby, the in-migration of labour slowed down. Third, Russia and Ukraine’s closure of grain export as well as the substantial decline in the value of the Norwegian krone led to increased prices of imported fodder and subsequently to higher prices of dairy products and meat. Thus, the corona crisis affects both the bulk-oriented and the more diversification-oriented agriculture. The long-term effects are uncertain.

The new global agricultural situation is important for the Norwegian trilemma, as it is for other countries with similar agricultural conditions, and a need for access to imports. Over the years, Norway has imported an increasing part of the agricultural goods that it needs; currently around 60 percent of its total food consumption (Vermes, 2018) as well as substantial parts of inputs to meat and dairy production. Over-production may therefore also be seen as a result of high imports. When the possibility for imports of both labour, inputs and food are restricted (or questioned), the room under the production roof opens up, and there might occur a new situation were policy makers once again can let go of the production limitations, and prioritize both stable farm structure and increasing productivity. It remains to be seen though, if and how policy makers adapt to the post-corona situation.

6. Concluding discussion

The brief history presented above illustrates that agricultural policy is all about balancing different goals. The main shifts are presented in Table 1. The trilemmatic nature of the goals that need to be balanced implies that the more the policy makers succeed with one set of goals, the worse they do with another goal. This review and interpretation of Norwegian agricultural policy is thereby both a story of success and of failure.

Throughout the post-war period, agriculture, due to technological development and political efforts, has experienced a formidable productivity growth. The development has led to increasing income for farmers, it has given the farmers a more flexible working day, and it has made Norwegian agriculture technologically advanced. In other words, it’s a success story. However, precisely because it has succeeded so well, agricultural policy has also failed because, with two exceptions, it had to sacrifice the goal of a stable farm structure to avoid overproduction. In line with the descriptions of wicked problems, the solutions have created new follow-up problems. Pastures and the least attractive agricultural land have been abandoned; production is being concentrated; meat and milk are produced with more and more concentrated feed, on steadily growing and more efficient farm units. This, in turn, leads to the closure of local processing industries. The problems escape simple solutions and form an ‘interconnected jam, where each solution creates a cascade of new problems and unintended consequences’, in the words Kuhmonen (2018) used to describe wicked problems. However, the concept of the trilemma helps in pinpointing the nature of the ‘wicked’ problem at hand, and as such it is a useful conceptual tool both for making sense of policy making and for the development of agricultural policies.

The corona virus is likely to create a new shift in the agricultural policy discourse – nationally and globally, both due to less globalised labour markets and agricultural markets. In times of crisis, attention turns towards national interests, for which food security is essential. Thus, understanding the complexities of agricultural policies also become essential.

Empirically, the analysis above targets Norwegian agricultural policy. A valid question is whether the concept is applicable beyond Norway – and beyond agriculture. Principally, the agricultural policy landscape in several developed economies – e.g. the EU – share several of the key features described above: increasing productivity is important for farmers and policymakers; overproduction is still a core issue; and rural restructuring and livelihoods are at stake. An in-depth analysis – and comparison – of agricultural policies in other countries, through the lenses of the trilemma would therefore be a natural next step for research on the topic. Moreover, the basic structure of the trilemma points to a tension between modernization and technological development of rural industries on the one hand, and rural livelihoods and settlement on the other. It is therefore also relevant to ask whether the model also is applicable for rethinking the relationship between rural
The agricultural policy trilemma is a simplification. However, to quote Dani Rodrik (2007): ‘sometimes simple and bold ideas help us see more clearly a complex reality that requires nuanced approaches’.

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