

“Raising the bottom and pushing at the top”:

How do NGOs, market actors and governments successfully manage the tension between a label’s feasibility and stringency in animal welfare labels in Northwestern Europe?



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1. Introduction

In response to the growing concerns regarding the impact of agriculture on animal welfare and the environment, NGOs, governments, and market actors have turned to standardization in order to promote sustainable animal products. This development does not come as a surprise since standards and standardization can be used as powerful tools in the organization of markets (Akerlof, 1970). Yet, even though these actors share the common goal of furthering the market for sustainable animal products, most standardization initiatives are solo endeavors of either an NGO, a market actor, or a government (Reinecke, Manning & von Hagen, 2012). This creates a complex situation as, often times, these different types of actors rely on each other in order to successfully establish a standard within a market (Gulbrandsen, 2010). This interdependency may come in different forms, such as legitimization, implementation, and legislation (Klooster, 2010). As a result, the governance of standardization initiatives among such different actors is an interesting topic of research, since it offers an opportunity to investigate how these stakeholders overcome their differences and disagreements and work together towards a common goal.

One of the most prominent mechanisms of standardization within the context of sustainable animal products, is labelling. According to Ponte and Cheyns (2013), products that are labelled based on their social and environmental sustainability are gaining importance in the consumption, trade, and production of animal products. The aim of such labels is to communicate sustainability-related information about a food product to (potential) consumers (Grunert, Hieke & Wills, 2014). This trend of sustainable labelling can also be observed in other industries, such as coffee (Reinecke, Manning & von Hagen, 2012) and forestry (Gulbrandsen, 2010). However, whilst there is a growing body of literature on labels as a form of standardization, there is still a lot unknown about the standardization of sustainability labels in the specific context of animal products (Parker, Carey, De Costa & Scrinis, 2017).

Within the context of sustainable animal products, labels can be focused on one or multiple different dimensions of sustainability, including: animal welfare, carbon footprint, and country of origin. This study looks specifically at sustainability labels that center around animal welfare. The decision to address animal welfare labels was made due to the fact that improving animal welfare is considered to be the joint responsibility of a large variety of stakeholders within and outside the chain of production (Verbeke, 2009). According to Verbeke (2009), these stakeholders can consist of actors such as retailers, public authorities, and NGOs. This understanding of improving animal welfare as a multi-stakeholder issue makes animal welfare labels interesting cases for studying the cooperative efforts between NGOs, governments, and

market actors to further the market for sustainable animal products. In fact, whilst the actors may share a common objective of improving animal welfare, these actors typically do not share the same values and organizing principles, which challenges their capacities for cooperation. Furthermore, there are a number of animal welfare labels that have achieved substantial levels of success in terms of customer recognition and market impact (Carey, Parker, & Scrinis, 2017). Yet, as animal welfare labels are a relatively new mechanism, there is still a lot to understand about what made these labels and the governance behind them successful (Parker, Carey, De Costa & Scrinis, 2017).

One of the biggest challenges that the stakeholders involved in animal welfare labels have to face with regards to the governance of the labels, is the constant tension between the very feasibility of the label and the animal welfare stringency of the criteria (Boström, 2006). According to Verbeke (2009), discussions amongst stakeholders surrounding animal welfare are influenced by the different frames through which the various actors evaluate animal welfare and this can lead to conflicts regarding the criteria and other aspects of the label. Therefore, this study will investigate how NGOs, market actors and governments successfully manage the tension between the feasibility of the label and animal welfare stringency in the development of labels. In order to accomplish this, the study will focus on the governance of five animal welfare labels from four different countries, namely: the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, and the United Kingdom. By using these five labels as case studies, it is possible to identify the instruments that NGOs, governments, and market actors use in order to navigate the tension between feasibility and animal welfare stringency and to try to create and implement successful animal welfare standards for sustainable animal products.

The decision to focus on five animal welfare labels from four different countries was made for various reasons. Firstly, in order to be able to study labels that were initiated by either an NGO, a government or a market actor, multiple case countries needed to be included in the analysis. It was not possible to find widely used and successful labels¹ from all three possible initiators in one single country. Analyzing labels from these three different initiators was important for gaining an understanding of how the roles of the various actors may impact the dynamics of the cooperation behind the labels. Thus, the previously mentioned countries were chosen as they provide examples of animal welfare labels that were initiated by either an NGO, a government, or a market actor.

¹ As successful is a subjective and relative term, an elaboration on how the labels were deemed to be successful can be found in the method section.

Secondly, the four countries that were chosen are all part of the region that is loosely defined as ‘Northwestern Europe’. Whilst this may not seem relevant at first, it becomes important when considering that the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Germany are all important import and export partners for animal products. This means that the introduction of an animal welfare label into one of these markets, may have an effect on the other countries as well. By studying labels within these four particular countries, the study can also shed light on how the different labels may or may not influence each other. As a result, the following research question was formulated:

‘How do NGOs, market actors and governments successfully manage the tension between a label’s feasibility and stringency in animal welfare labels in Northwestern Europe?’

The findings of this study contribute to the currently existing research on standardization and animal welfare labels by building on theoretical concepts (e.g. partial organization and socially-driven standardization) and by providing new insights into the way tensions are managed in the cooperation behind animal welfare labels. More specifically, the findings of this study highlight the particular role of governments, the ambiguity and multiplicity of stakeholders’ identities, and the importance of time. Furthermore, by studying standardization and animal welfare labels in different scenarios, it can be observed whether the current principles of standardization are applicable to a greater variety of cases. Additionally, by learning about the way NGOs, market actors, and governments work together to manage the tension between feasibility and animal welfare stringency, successful elements of cooperation can be identified. These results can then be applied to other contexts and used to further enhance existing theories.

Besides the theoretical contributions, the results of this study also provide practical contributions. For example, NGOs, market actors, and governments may use the results of this study in order to improve and better understand their governance of animal welfare standardization processes and initiatives. Moreover, the results of this study will be used as a topic of discussion during an international conference. In a letter to the Dutch parliament, the minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality Carola Schouten announced that she will organize a conference in December 2020 on the topics of sustainability in animal agriculture in order to increase the demand for sustainable animal products within Northwestern-Europe. The conference is aimed at: sharing knowledge and experiences, connecting governments with NGOs and market actors involved in the chain of production and consumption, identifying common goals and problems, enlarging and inspiring the market for sustainable animal

products in Northwestern Europe, and, ultimately, to collectively agree on and sign a letter of intent to further the market for sustainable animal products. The results of this study will also be presented to the attendees of the conference in a preparatory booklet consisting of relevant introductory information about the market for sustainable animal products and interesting initiatives occurring in the countries in attendance. Therefore, the results of this study will provide a valuable addition to the content of the conference and the preliminary knowledge of the attendees.

Moving forward, this thesis will first present the theoretical background of the research topic, then elaborate on the methodology of the study, provide an overview of the results, and finally discuss the implications of the results and the limitations of the study in the discussion and conclusion section.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Standardization as a form of organization

Standards are present in many aspects of everyday life. For example, standards ensure the compatibility of communication technologies (David & Greenstein, 1990) and the size of paper (Brunsson, Rasche & Seidl, 2012), but also the societal responsibility and accountability of firms (Gilbert, Rasche & Waddock, 2011). Even though standards are so omnipresent, it is difficult to define what a standard actually is. In the absence of a formal understanding, Brunsson, Rasche and Seidl (2012) have formulated a definition that encompasses different characteristics of standards that are applicable to most domains, namely: *‘a standard is a rule for common and voluntary use, decided by one or several people or organizations’*. This definition reflects various attributes of standards, such as the voluntary nature of the adoption of a standard (it is not a law), how it is a specific type of rule (not an implicit social norm), and how standards are usually intended for common use (as opposed to small groups) (Brunsson, Rasche & Seidl, 2012). Regardless of the fact that standards do not hold any legal authority, standardization can be a powerful tool in the organization of markets (Brunsson, Rasche & Seidl, 2012).

According to Brunsson, Rasche and Seidl (2012), standardization can be viewed as a means of organization. More specifically, within organization studies, standardization is considered to be a form of ‘partial organization’ (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). Ahrne and Brunsson (2011) explain how not all actors who wish to organize, also have the desire or opportunity to create a formal organization. As a result, actors may only use one or a few of the

elements of a formal organization in order to establish a form of organization (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). This cherry-picking of characteristics of formal organizations can also be observed in the context of standardization. Standardization mainly claims the use of one element of formal organizations, namely the use of rules (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). However, standardization rarely relies on, for example, the existence of hierarchical authority (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). This absence of aspects that are vital to a formal organization makes standardization an example of ‘partial organization’ (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). Even though standardization is considered to be a form of ‘partial organization’, this does not diminish its ability to organize markets. The various ways in which standardization can be used to organize (part of) a market will be discussed in the next paragraph.

Firstly, standardization is used to organize markets by reducing the asymmetry of information between sellers and buyers (Akerlof, 1970). This information asymmetry refers to the difference in knowledge that consumers and producers may have with regards to the specific qualities of a product. By introducing standards into a market, producers become able to easily communicate to consumers that their product adheres to a set of basic requirements (Brunsson, Rasche & Seidl, 2012). Secondly, standardization can contribute to market organization through the promotion of harmonization and compatibility (Brunsson, Rasche & Seidl, 2012). Standards are able to join the interests of actors that are normally only competitors and contribute to better communication between different market actors (Brunsson, Rasche & Seidl, 2012). Thirdly, standardization can play an important role in facilitating institutional change (Brunsson, Rasche & Seidl, 2012). Standards are able to organize institutional change as they are able to challenge and alter behaviors and identities that have been institutionalized (Brunsson, Rasche & Seidl, 2012). This ability is the result of standards enabling a process called mimetic isomorphism (Brunsson, Rasche & Seidl, 2012). The impact of standards on institutional behaviors and identities can particularly be seen when looking at standards that are the result of societal movements (Reinecke, Manning & von Hagen, 2012). Within the context of standards and standardization, standards that are socially-oriented are distinct from other types of standards.

2.2. Sustainability standards and the dynamics of multi-stakeholder collaborations

According to Reinecke, Manning and von Hagen (2012), standards that are socially-oriented are unique due to their political and normative dimensions. These dimensions provide socially-oriented standards with a justification for their existence as they contribute to developments that are considered desirable according to society and/or public policy objectives

(Reinecke, Manning & von Hagen, 2012). However, this also means that ambiguous concepts such as social justice and ethics are part of the standardization process and may lead to discussions amongst both creators and adopters (Reinecke, Manning & von Hagen, 2012). As this dynamic is unique to socially-oriented standards and not well-understood, this makes them particularly interesting to look into. In terms of the previously described dynamic, sustainability standards are subject to a lot of contention and, as a result, can be difficult to implement (Reinecke, Manning & von Hagen).

A sustainability standard is defined by Gilbert, Rasche & Waddock (2011) as: *'a set of voluntary predefined rules, procedures, and methods to systematically assess, measure, audit and/or communicate the social and environmental behaviour and/or performance of firms'*. Similarly to other socially-oriented standards, sustainability standards are created by social movements and can lead to the birth of new markets (Reinecke, Manning & von Hagen, 2012). In the case of sustainability standards, this establishment of new markets can be observed with, for example, sustainable coffee (Kolk, 2005) and grass-fed beef (Weber, Heinze & DeSoucey, 2008). Another one of these new markets that is the result of social movements, is the market for sustainable animal products.

Over the course of the past 50 years, the production and consumption of animal products has quadrupled (Ritchie & Roser, 2019). Whilst this increase in the production and consumption of animal products can be interpreted as a positive sign of growing global wealth (Valin et al., 2014), the current levels of production and consumption have many negative side-effects (Godfray et al., 2018). These undesirable effects include: the adverse effects on people's health (Bouvard et al., 2015), the negative impact on the environment (Tilman & Clark, 2014), the difficult position of farmers within the chain of production (Zachariasse & Bunte, 2003), and the implications for the welfare of animals both in the chain of production and in the wild (Ingenbleek et al., 2013). As a result of these unwanted ramifications, there is a wide-spread belief and pressure from society that the contemporary agricultural system is unsustainable (Busch, Gauly and Spiller, 2018). One of the ways in which NGOs, market parties, and governments are attempting to mitigate this problem, is through sustainable animal products (Ingenbleek et al., 2013).

Even though there is no agreed upon definition for sustainable animal products, the Monitor Sustainable Food (2018) provides a broad understanding of when a food product is considered sustainable, namely: *'[...] there is more consideration for the environment, animal welfare, and social aspects during the production and processing of the food than is legally required'*. In order to inform consumers of the degree of sustainability of an animal product,

NGOs, governments, and market actors are referring to labels as a form of standardization. Food labels are generally defined as ‘*the marketing and branding on the packaging and retail display of food*’ and serves to differentiate a product from other similar products on the basis of a particular set of attributes (Parker, Carey, De Costa & Scrinis, 2017). Labels can be public or private, and voluntary or mandatory (Parker, Carey, De Costa & Scrinis, 2017). Over the past three decades, the popularity of labels as tools for tackling sustainability related issues has grown substantially in Northwestern Europe (Grunert, Hieke & Wills, 2014).

As mentioned previously, standardization can contribute to a decrease in information asymmetry and, according to Weinrich and Spiller (2016), labelling is the most important tool in reducing information asymmetry between producers and consumers. In the context of sustainable animal products, this information asymmetry predominantly refers to information about the underlying production processes behind animal products (Weinrich & Spiller, 2016). Darby and Karni (1973) specifically refer to the credence attributes of products that are difficult for consumers to verify when they buy a product. An example of such a credence attribute of an animal product, is the amount of floor space that is available per animal on a farm. Weinrich and Spiller (2016) explain how these credence attributes are usually related to ethical concerns and, as a result, are what consumers look for when wanting to buy a sustainable animal product. Hence, sustainability labels on animal products are often times particularly used for visually communicating these types of attributes about a product to consumers (Weinrich & Spiller, 2016). According to Weinrich and Spiller (2016), this process transforms credence goods into search goods.

Correspondingly, the trend of sustainability labelling in animal products is closely related to the generally increasing public interest in ethical and sustainable food products (Schulze, Spiller & Risius, 2019). Especially the market for products with animal welfare standards that exceed a country’s legal requirements is on the rise (Weinrich & Spiller, 2016). However, as mentioned previously, socially-oriented standards such as animal welfare standards, are prone to ambiguity and discussions between creators and adopters. When considering that the improvement of animal welfare conditions is perceived to be the joint responsibility of all stakeholders within the agro-food chain, it is unsurprising that the governance behind animal welfare labels is especially complicated (Verbeke, 2009). Yet, whilst many studies have been conducted on the governance behind health- and nutritional labelling, less studies have been executed on the governance of animal welfare labels (Parker, Carey, De Costa & Scrinis, 2017).

According to Verbeke (2009), discussions amongst stakeholders surrounding animal welfare are influenced by the different frames through which the various actors evaluate animal welfare. For example, market actors tend to be more focused on pursuing their economic goals (e.g. profit and corporate image) whereas NGOs are more concerned with achieving their ethical goals (higher animal welfare) and this influences their perception and actions regarding animal welfare (Verbeke, 2009). Furthermore, taking into account that animal welfare labels tend to be created by either an NGO, a government, or a market actor, but are dependent on all for implementation, it is a significant accomplishment that many animal welfare labels have successfully found their way onto markets. For example, if a government wants to introduce a label, it needs market actors in order to implement the label and may need NGOs in order to legitimize the label (Sønderskov & Daugbjerg, 2010). However, if an NGO wants to introduce a label, it needs the market to implement the label and the government to (at minimum) allow the label to be implemented (Sønderskov & Daugbjerg, 2010). Furthermore, if a market party wants to introduce a label, it may need NGOs for legitimization and the government to (at minimum) allow the label to be implemented in order to avoid the accusation of greenwashing (Böstrom, 2006). As a result, this effort to organize a wide variety of stakeholders on a challenging issue such as animal welfare through labelling schemes provides an interesting topic of research.

Based on the literature on eco-labelling and standard-setting processes in general, a number of standard-setting ideals for animal welfare labelling schemes have been identified by scholars such as Gulbrandsen (2010) and Boström (2006). These ideals should guide the governance of animal welfare labels and include: inclusiveness, openness, accountability, transparency, and auditability (Boström, 2006). Through practicing these standard-setting ideals, the actors involved in the labelling process hope to establish credibility within and outside of the label (Boström, 2006). However, successfully putting these standard-setting ideals into practice can be difficult as the ideals are reliant on the subjective and, often times, conflicting views of the different stakeholders (Boström, 2006). This can lead to disagreements on both substantive and procedural matters, such as the specific criteria of the label and the interpretation of ideals. Consequently, one of the biggest challenges that the variety of stakeholders face when attempting to practice standard-setting ideals in the creation and implementation of animal welfare labels, is to maintain a balance between the feasibility of the label and animal welfare stringency (Boström, 2006).

The tension between a label's feasibility and animal welfare stringency is the result of the dynamic interplay between the notions that the criteria of a label need to be economically

and technically feasible for producers, whilst also ensuring a substantial improvement in the welfare of animals. Boström and Klintman (2006) explain how this tension is essentially a reflection of the positions of market pragmatists and animal welfare pragmatists and the emphasis that they place on either feasibility or animal welfare stringency as a result of their individual positions. In the case of animal welfare labels, market pragmatists tend to be retailers, slaughterhouses, farmers, and other producing and processing parties whereas animal welfare pragmatist are typically NGOs. Whilst it is self-explanatory as to why animal welfare organizations strive for the highest possible level of animal welfare, it is important to consider the roles of market actors and governments in the agro-food sector in order to understand their different positions on the debate between feasibility and animal welfare stringency.

According to Schulze, Spiller and Risius (2019), food retailers are the most important market actors in shaping the demands of society and the chain of production. Esjberg et al. (2016) describe how this is the result of retailers' ability and function to affect the purchasing behavior of consumers through the conscious selection of which products to offer in stores and the way these products are then displayed. This role is accompanied by a certain level of responsibility and has resulted in retailers being identified as 'ecological gatekeepers' (Schulze, Spiller & Risius, 2019). However, as is the case with most innovations, it is commonly accepted that selling products with higher animal welfare poses a certain risk (Schulze, Spiller & Risius, 2019). Fernqvist and Ekelund (2014) explain how, in the case of higher animal welfare products, this risk is the result of the additional financial and mental resources that are required in order to communicate the animal welfare attributes of the product to consumers. Moreover, as consumers are not able to personally experience the animal welfare behind a product but may be expected to pay more for a product because of it, a lot of effort needs to be put into communicating these values to consumers (Risius & Hamm, 2017). Additionally, the creation and implementation of an animal welfare label is a long-term process and requires changes along the entire chain of supply (Franz, von Meyer & Spiller, 2010). As a result of these additional efforts and risks, retailers have a strong interest and focus on the feasibility of a label and discussing its specific criteria before committing to its implementation (Schulze, Spiller & Risius, 2019).

In addition to market actors, governments also play an important role in the agro-food sector. Various scholars even argue that, without government intervention, markets for products with sustainability claims might fail due to a lack of consumer trust in the information provided by private actors (Janssen & Hamm, 2014). Sønderskov and Daugbjerg (2010) explain this lack of trust as the result of the possibility that market actors may exploit the information asymmetry

that exists between themselves and consumers in order to increase their profits. Within the context of organic products, this lack of consumer trust is easier to manage as the European Union has introduced legislation with regards to when a product can claim to be organic (Janssen & Hamm, 2014). However, for products with higher animal welfare standards, there is no such legislation. Whilst the legislation of individual countries does provide a minimum set of standards for animal welfare, this only assures consumers that the basic legal requirements of animal welfare have been met (Janssen & Hamm, 2014). This lack of further legislation would invite us to assume the potentially active governmental involvement with animal welfare labels in order to increase the legitimacy of labels. However, in practice, there are various degrees of involvement from the state in animal welfare labelling (Janssen & Hamm, 2014). This involvement can range from the state setting the standards and certifying products, to merely recognizing and not rejecting a label (Hysing, 2009). However, it is unclear whether there is an ideal level of involvement for governments in animal welfare labels and what level of involvement this should then be (Janssen & Hamm, 2014). Additionally, it also unclear what role the varying degrees of involvement from the state can play in balancing the tension between a label's feasibility and animal welfare stringency.

Based on the existing literature, it is thus known that the tensions between feasibility and animal welfare stringency is one of the biggest points of contention in animal welfare labelling due to the conflicting positions of stakeholders. However, little is known regarding how the resulting tension is managed by stakeholders throughout the creation and implementation phases of animal welfare labels. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research question:

'How do NGOs, market actors and governments successfully manage the tension between a label's feasibility and stringency in animal welfare labels in Northwestern Europe?'

3. Methods






With regards to the methodology of this study, it is important to note that the process of contacting (potential) participants and the collection of the data took place during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. These extraordinary circumstances had several implications for the methodology. Firstly, the researcher was not able to meet the participants in person in order to conduct the interviews. Whereas video calling provided a solution in most cases, this is not the same as speaking with someone in person. Secondly, as people had many challenges to face with regards to their personal and professional lives during these times, it took more time to

schedule some of the interviews than normally would have been the case. Finally, COVID-19 was a somewhat unintended topic of discussion in nearly all of the interviews. As the origins of COVID-19 are being linked to the way that humans have been interacting with and treating other animals for many years, COVID-19 was on the minds of those involved with the market for animal products and animal welfare. This was mostly expressed through discussions about whether COVID-19 would have an impact on the type of animal products that people consume and the frequency of this consumption. However, the comments with regards to COVID-19 were not included in the analysis as they were not applicable to the purpose of this study.

3.1 Case selection

As mentioned during the introduction, this study focused on five animal welfare labels from four different countries. An overview of these labels can be found in the label matrix (see Table 1). These five specific labels were chosen for various reasons. Firstly, all of these labels focus solely on animal welfare. In order to enhance the comparability between the different cases, it was important that the labels were comparable with regards to their aim and criteria. All of the five chosen labels only concern animal welfare and the criteria show many similarities. Secondly, the selected cases are all examples of successful animal welfare labels. This notion of success was important in the context of studying how the stakeholders manage feasibility versus animal welfare stringency as unsuccessful labels may not have been able to achieve a considerable level of long-term feasibility. Whereas success is a relative term, the success of a label was assessed according to the percentage of people per country that know about the label and the number of supermarkets and products that carry the label. The year of establishment of the labels was also taken into consideration when conducting this assessment as a two-year-old label cannot be expected to have the same amount of exposure as a thirteen-year-old label. According to this assessment, all of the labels have been successful for at least two years. Thirdly, the labels were selected based on whether they were instigated by an NGO, a market actor, or a government. In order to properly understand how the tension between animal welfare stringency and feasibility is managed, it was important to look at labels that were initiated by each of these individual stakeholders since this may have had an impact on the way that the tension is managed. Studying animal welfare labels that were created by all of these stakeholders was not possible within one single country. This is also the reason why two German labels were included in the study. Combined, the cases consist of 3 labels that were initiated by animal welfare NGOs, one label that was initiated by a market actor, and one label that was initiated by a government.

Table 1. Label matrix.

	Beter Leven Keurmerk	RSPCA Assured	Für Mehr Tierschutz	Haltungsform	Bedre Dyrevelfærd
Logo					
Country of origin	The Netherlands	The United Kingdom	Germany	Germany	Denmark
Initiator	Dierenbescherming (Animal welfare NGO)	Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Animal welfare NGO)	Tierschutzbund (Animal welfare NGO)	Lidl Deutschland (Retailer)	Danish Ministry of Environment and Food (Government)
Type of label	Animal welfare	Animal welfare	Animal welfare	Animal welfare	Animal welfare
Year of establishment	2007	1994	2013	2018	2017

3.2 Data collection

In order to answer the research question, this study made use of a qualitative research method, namely semi-structured interviews. The decision to use a qualitative method for the purpose of this study was based on a number of intellectual and practical characteristics of qualitative research methods. Primarily, qualitative research is suitable for ‘*understanding the processes by which events and actions take place*’ and qualitative research methods allow researchers to understand the meaning that participants give to the actions and situations that are studied (Maxwell, 2008).

In total, 15 interviews were conducted between April 2020 and July 2020 and, correspondingly, the participants of the interviews represented 15 different organizations and governments. An overview of the organizations, the types of organizations, and the corresponding countries can be found in Table 2. An interview guide was used to conduct the interviews. The guide can be found in appendix 1. The interview guide provided the researcher with a set of pre-determined questions. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted in a different manner than was originally planned. As opposed to the majority of the interviews taking place in person, all interviews were conducted through (video) calling. Video calling was preferred to interacting without a visual connection as this allowed for a closer replication of face-to-face interviews. Additionally, being able to look at

the expressions of an interviewee whilst they are answering a question can be beneficial to understanding the response. Thus, the majority of the interviews were conducted by video calling through either WebEx, MS Teams or Skype. However, a small number of participants did not feel comfortable with video calling and preferred to call via telephone.

The duration of the interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 75 minutes. Whilst the majority of the interviews lasted for approximately 60 minutes, two interviews were substantially shorter. This was caused by the fact that these participants had not reserved more time for the interviews due to their schedules. Prior to the actual interviews, the interviewees were asked about whether they consented to being recorded. Even though the majority of the participants agreed to being recorded, a few participants did not feel comfortable disclosing sensitive information regarding other stakeholders whilst being recorded. The interviews that could not be recorded had a longer duration than the other interviews as the researcher had to type along with the answers of the participants. In order to record the other interviews, the application TapeACall was used to record the telephone interviews and the chosen video calling application was used to record the video calls.

Table 2. Overview of the interviewed organizations, types of organizations, and countries.

Name of organization	Type of organization	Country
RSPCA Assured	NGO	The United Kingdom
Dierenbescherming	NGO	The Netherlands
LTO Nederland	NGO	The Netherlands
Tierschutzbund	NGO	Germany
Initiative Tierwohl	NGO	Germany
The Organization for Cooperation of Animal Welfare Groups	NGO	Denmark
Agricultural Council of the United Kingdom	Government	The United Kingdom
Agricultural Council of Germany	Government	Germany
Agricultural Council of Denmark	Government	Denmark
Bedre Dyrevelfærd	Government	Denmark
Tesco	Market actor - retailer	The United Kingdom
Albert Heijn	Market actor - retailer	The Netherlands
Lidl Deutschland	Market actor - retailer	Germany
Coop DK	Market actor - retailer	Denmark

The participants for the semi-structured interviews were selected through snowball sampling. The use of this method was based on a study by Panwar and Hansen (2007). Panwar and Hansen

conducted a study on corporate responsibility standards for forest products using snowball sampling. For each animal welfare label, the first information-rich participant was determined to be a representative from the organization or government behind the label itself (see Table 1). The information-rich participants were typically people who were involved with the label from the start and contributed to both its creation and implementation. Their specific functions were usually also solely focused on the animal welfare label. The first information-rich cases consisted of participants who were involved in the creation and implementation of the Dutch Beter Leven Keurmerk. This decision to start with the Beter Leven Keurmerk was made due to the Dutch representatives being the easiest for the researcher to come into contact with through the existence of previously established connections.

As the organizations involved in animal welfare labels in Europe tend to be in contact with one another, the first information-rich cases already resulted in many new connections and interviews. Since the researcher was also doing an internship at the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality throughout the process of writing this thesis, the connections of the Ministry were used to identify and approach other information-rich cases. However, in practice, this meant that not all participants were approached in the same manner. A number of the participants were approached directly by the researcher through a pre-written e-mail whilst others were initially contacted through other participants. In order to ensure that all participants received a relatively similar introduction to the study, a standardized text was provided to the participants that they could use when contacting potential other participants. The outline of this text can be found in the interview guide in appendix 1.

The participants had different functions within the organizations that they represented. These functions ranged from vice-president of sustainability, to agricultural council. All participants were qualified and authorized to represent their respective organizations on the topic of animal welfare labels through their functions and experience. The most important selection criteria for the participants were that they had a lot of knowledge about the label, the process of creating and implementing the label, and the general market for products with higher animal welfare in their respective countries. In some cases, this meant that the person that the researcher initially came into contact with referred the researcher to a different colleague with more insider knowledge.

3.3 Data analysis

Upon the completion of the collection of the data, the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo. The transcriptions were rough transcriptions, which meant that background

noises and topics unrelated to the study were not included. After the interviews were transcribed, the transcriptions were analyzed through a process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The axial coding and selective coding were repeated two times in order to come to the final results. Throughout the coding process, Boeije (2010) was used for guidance and reference on the coding process. Upon reaching the point of saturation with the open coding (Boeije, 2010), five categories were established, namely: identity, interdependency, changeability, motivation, and tension. Throughout the first round of axial coding, these categories were the result of the aggregation of a number of initial codes ranging from two to six. During the first round of selective coding, some of these codes were moved around but the majority stayed within the same category.

After the first complete round of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, the discrepancy between the number of codes per category was substantial and some categories appeared to have overlapping codes. The results also appeared to lack focus. This led to a second round of axial coding and selective coding. Following this second round of coding, the categories changed from five categories to three categories, namely: identity, power resources, and time. This made the results more cohesive and the categories more balanced with regards to the number of codes per category. These categories and their corresponding codes provided the final results of the analysis. A visual overview of the codes and corresponding categories can be found in appendix 2.

4. Results

Based on the analysis of the interviews, it was found that the three instruments that the stakeholders utilize in order to navigate the tension between feasibility and animal welfare stringency in animal welfare labels are: time, identity and power resources. In the following sections, these three instruments and their practical implications will be elaborated upon.

4.1 Time, dynamism and the notion of change in animal welfare labels

Both the nature of labels themselves and the organizational dynamics behind them are dynamic. This is reflected in, for example, the way that label's criteria evolve over time but also in the partners involved that may come and go. Additionally, the societal debates on topics related to sustainability and animal welfare are constantly in motion. Thus, it makes sense that animal welfare labels have to adapt to these changing circumstances and insights as time progresses. We will discuss two aspects of time that have an impact on the tension between animal welfare stringency and feasibility.

Firstly, time plays out in the dynamics of the cooperation between these different actors by allowing for the selection of some sustainability concerns and thereby the exclusion of others from animal welfare labels. The majority of animal welfare labels focus solely on the level of animal welfare with which animal products were produced. This provides the labels with a strong and concrete sense of both purpose and identity. Other labels, such as organic labels and environmental labels, tend to focus on a broader spectrum of issues that may or may not include animal welfare. As a result, it can be a more complex process to establish criteria and to have a multitude of relevant stakeholders agree on them. As such, the complexity of environmental- and sustainability issues also makes managing the balance between animal welfare stringency and feasibility amongst partners more complex. Based on the analysis, we find that the omission of most other aspects of sustainability other than animal welfare in the criteria of animal welfare labels, contributed to finding this balance by being able to focus on one aspect of sustainability, namely animal welfare. The Dutch NGO Dierenbescherming explains:

‘One of the differences between our label and organic labels, is that organic labels also focus on other aspects of sustainability besides animal welfare, such as the environmental considerations. Our complete focus on animal welfare actually makes it easier for us because animal welfare is already complicated enough without including other environmental concerns. Being able to focus on this one thing also makes discussing about it with others easier.’ - Dierenbescherming

Boström and Klintman (2006) connect the omission of certain environmental problems from labelling schemes to the power of retailers and other market actors and their focus on feasibility. According to these scholars, subjects such as transport and large-scale production are ‘sacred’ to market actors and addressing such topics may create tension within the cooperation with actors outside of the market (Boström & Klintman, 2006). However, this study found this omission of certain topics to be more nuanced than has been previously described in the literature. Whilst there are topics within the realm of animal welfare that are more sensitive to certain stakeholders (e.g. castration of piglets), the criteria of the labels need to possess a level of detail that covers all aspects of the welfare of the animal in the chain of production in order to be feasible and auditable. Furthermore, this means that all aspects of animal welfare need to be described in detail in the criteria of the labels thus also including other ‘sacred’ or sensitive topics. As such, we would argue that the omission of other aspect of sustainability can

contribute to managing the tension between feasibility and animal welfare stringency but only when these elements of sustainability are not related to animal welfare.

This process was aided even further by the fact that the stakeholders behind the animal welfare labels in our cases take inspiration from previously established animal welfare labels, mimicking some of the defining elements and benefiting from the best practices portrayed in other countries. For example, as the German NGO Tierschutzbund and the Danish NGO DOSO put it:

‘In order to define the label, we started with a steering group. Freedom Food and the Beter Leven Keurmerk were the inspirations for our label and the criteria.’ - Tierschutzbund

‘We were inspired by Freedom Food. There are so many labels already and new labels are difficult to create so looking at other animal welfare labels makes it easier. We also went to the Netherlands to look at the implementation of the criteria of no castration for piglets.’ - DOSO

In this sense, establishing a label can become easier as time progresses, as it allows actors to have access to and discuss the experiences and outcomes around existing labels and the types of collaborations that gave birth to them.

Secondly, as our understanding of sustainability and animal welfare are dynamic in nature, animal welfare labels can change over time. Common to all our cases, the criteria of labels change and evolve throughout their existence. This is important as the specific criteria of a label tend to be the biggest point of contention between feasibility and animal welfare stringency. The shared understanding among all stakeholders that labels grow, change and develop over time, means that criteria on which the partners cannot agree during the creation phase, have the potential to be tabled and revisited at a later point during the development phase. These criteria can also involve the other previously discussed elements of sustainability. This can be a great asset when it comes to the resolution of the tension between animal welfare stringency and feasibility. Even though the tabling of issues is not a permanent solution, it can lead to keeping the possibility of a window of opportunity open in the future where the standpoints of stakeholders might have moved in the direction of other stakeholders. This is how the Danish NGO DOSO explains the importance of adopting a long-term perspective when it comes to deciding on the selection of labels’ criteria:

‘I have been forced to give but everybody is trying to understand that, in order to succeed, you have to give and take. There’s many things that I could have wished better for the animals but

we can take new criteria in again in the future so for now it was more important that we accomplish something and maybe revisit later.’ – DOSO

Furthermore, as the market for animal products keeps evolving and our understanding of animal welfare along with it, incorporating new elements and criteria into the label can save it from becoming outdated and irrelevant over time. This notion appeared to be especially important to the NGOs involved in the labels. On the one hand, the animal welfare organizations involved with labels aim to institutionalize the animal welfare standards that are being set through the labels whilst, on the other hand, they also try to avoid this process of institutionalization as this could halt the progress that they are trying to accomplish in the future, as they push for higher standards and more ambitious/stringent criteria. By continuously reassessing and updating the criteria of the labels, the labels maintain their impact and keep promoting higher animal welfare. Eyerman and Jamison (1991) describe this tension between relying on institutionalization whilst also avoiding it in a more conceptual way: *‘there is something in the view that movements continuously aim to open up new conceptual spaces, thus avoiding institutionalization’*. However, this goal of animal welfare organizations to continuously open up new spaces in thinking about sustainability and push for higher animal welfare, is also a source of tension between the NGOs and the market actors and governments. A representative of LTO Nederland described it as follows:

‘A lot of farmers are looking for when they are doing things good enough. At a certain point, you want to feel like you have got a 6 and that you passed. You need to have a line somewhere that something is good. It seems like it is never good enough. Sometimes this is demotivating.’
– LTO Nederland

Whereas the labels were currently managing this tension through dialogue and open discussions, it is a tension that is lurking in the background of these multi-stakeholder partnerships.

4.2 Identity: multiplicity and ambivalence

The second instrument that was identified through the analysis, was identity. The notion of identity was present in both implicit and explicit manners. As discussed in the theoretical framework, organizing the collaboration between a wide variety of stakeholders that may normally have polarizing values in a voluntary partnership, is a challenge. However, the

concept of identity emerged from the analysis of the interviews as one of the instruments that aid the unlikely stakeholders in maneuvering the tension between feasibility and animal welfare stringency. Identity, in this sense, does not merely refer to the shared understanding that stakeholders need to build through their cooperation of what the animal welfare label is about in terms of the selection of criteria. It also refers to how the very identity of the different stakeholders is instrumentalized for specific purposes and the practical implications this has in relation to their common and distinct goals and motivations. These different identities of the stakeholders, including their practical implications, will be discussed below.

NGOs: in between supporters and the market

Animal welfare NGOs strategically use their identity in the context of cooperation for the creation of animal welfare labels. Whilst working on animal welfare labels with other stakeholders, animal welfare organizations have to operate according to the expectations of their supporters, as well as those of the others involved in the partnerships in order to achieve a higher level of animal welfare. Most of the time, NGOs thus find themselves in a position ‘in-between’: their supporters might not agree with the very project of collaborating with market actors because they consider it contradictory to the purpose of animal welfare organizations, whilst market actors expect the NGOs to make concessions with regards to their initial aspirations. Hence, the analysis showed that all NGOs have (had) to handle steep criticism from their supporters for working on animal welfare labelling schemes. As this Dutch representative put it:

‘Our supporters are very critical and there are some who still do not support the fact that we put our name on the packaging of dead animals. They argue that we are there to protect animals and that we are going against this by supporting the consumption of meat.’ – Dierenbescherming

However, even though contributing to the consumption of animal products is far from the goal of animal welfare organizations and leads to criticism from the organization’s supporters in all cases, animal welfare organizations recognize the power of their names and logos and the impact they can have through labels. As such, NGOs strategically instrumentalize their identity for the benefit of creating a label, even if it is not in line with the expectations of their supporters. Yet, this does not mean that the NGOs are indifferent to this criticism. For example, some NGOs hosted special events in order to discuss the label with their supporters and written

explanations for the involvement with the labels were also present on the websites of most NGOs. All animal welfare organizations justified putting their names and logos on animal products with the following reasoning:

'We've had a lot of problems and are still in a lot of trouble with our members. Our end goal is that no one will eat animal products anymore. Our supporters say: "You're selling meat!'. But we will promote every tiny little step. Through our label, we are able to slightly improve the welfare of millions of animals as opposed to improve the welfare of a few animals by a lot. That is so important.' – Tierschutzbund

In order to accomplish a feasible change in the welfare for a large number of animals, animal welfare NGOs have to instrumentalize their own identity and compromise their greater goal of humans no longer consuming animal products even despite the criticisms of their supporters.

At the same time, in order to accomplish this feasible change, animal welfare organizations also have to maintain or comply with a certain 'identity' in the eyes of their fellow stakeholders as they otherwise would not be considered as legitimate potential partners. As is the case with most movements, animal rights and animal welfare movements can be associated with a sense of so-called radicalism and extremism. Based on the analysis, the absence of this association does play a role throughout the creation and implementation of animal welfare labels. Indeed, market actors are hesitant to cooperate with parties that they consider or perceive as a "radical" movement. Thus, even though animal welfare organizations may not identify themselves as part of a radical movement, if they are identified as such by market actors, this can have a significant impact on their ability to cooperate with market actors and their influence on the degree of animal welfare. A concrete example of the influence of the identification by others as a non-radical movement came forward in the case of the Dutch label Beter Leven Keurmerk:

'The difference between us and some other animal welfare organizations is that we have always been open to dialogue and treat everyone in the same way. Other animal welfare organizations occasionally use television commercials and things like that to call out the practices of retailers but that is not something that we do. We have always looked for cooperation and that makes people want to cooperate with us as well.' – Dierenbescherming

One of the animal welfare organizations that was identified by other stakeholders as being more radical, was the Dutch NGO Wakker Dier. Over the years, Wakker Dier has released various

campaigns in the Netherlands that directly called out retailers for the types of animal products that they were offering to consumers. Retailers indicated that, whilst they understand that these types of stakeholders also have a role to play in society and the public debate, they would be less inclined to work with them on animal welfare issues. Dutch retailer Albert Heijn explained this as follows:

‘The campaigns of Wakker Dier don’t bother us too much because everyone has their role to play. However, we are able to work with the Dierenbescherming because they are willing to listen and not just point fingers. That changes things and makes cooperation possible.’ – Albert Heijn

As a result of being regarded by potential partners as non-radical and willing to cooperate, NGOs are able to exert their influence on the balance between feasibility and animal welfare stringency in labels. Other stakeholders respect their position and are willing to consider their proposed animal welfare criteria in response to receiving the same treatment within and outside of the cooperation. Without this self-identification and perceived identity by others as ‘non-radical’, NGOs are less likely to be able to cooperate with market- and state stakeholders and ultimately ensure higher levels of animal welfare. This higher animal welfare can entail, for example, ensuring more square meters of space per animal or toys for the animals to play with. This shows how the internal and external identity of NGOs can have a direct impact on their ability to pursue higher levels of animal welfare through labels.

The ambivalence of retailers’ identity and practice

In comparison to the NGOs and governments involved in animal welfare labels, retailers are in somewhat of a unique and luxurious position with regards to their identity. Whereas animal welfare organizations are devoted to a singular cause that drives all of their actions and governments have a responsibility to provide clear and unambiguous information on the treatment of animals to their citizens, retailers are not bound by such uniform expectations. As market actors, retailers are merely expected to provide consumers with choices and options and are not expected to tell consumers what they should or should not buy. This gives retailers a lot of leeway to play on different fields by being present in distinct market niches and thus to identify themselves in a multitude of ways. For example, a retailer is able to identify as a market actor that is conscious of animal welfare as a result of selling products with an animal welfare

label whilst, at the same time, also selling animal products that were not produced with animal welfare in mind. One of the retailers explained this as follows:

‘With us, the customer gets to choose. Do I want to pay for an animal product that came from better circumstances, or spend very little and accept that animal welfare has not been a priority? [...] We sell all of these animal products side by side, which is fine and, for at least the next five to ten years, this will be the case.’ – Lidl Deutschland

Another retailer added to this by stating:

‘Everybody has their part to play. Our role as a retailer is to inform our customers about the products that they are buying. [...] Everybody needs to have something to choose from.’ – Albert Heijn

This flexibility with regards to the way that retailers are able to identify themselves is also present in the way that retailers perceive the balance between feasibility and animal welfare stringency. As retailers are not expected by most consumers to only sell products with high animal welfare, the retailers are able to be quite flexible with regards to the demands for the criteria of the animal welfare labels. Products with the high standards of animal welfare organizations can co-exist next to the products with lower standards of animal welfare in the shelves of supermarkets. According to the retailers, the animal welfare organizations, and governments, this made the discussions about the specific criteria go a lot smoother and decreased polarization within the cooperation. However, it is important to note that retailers focus on feasibility and are willing to aim lower with regards to animal welfare standards in order to secure their profits. This focus of market actors is in contention with the focus of animal welfare organizations to secure the highest possible level of animal welfare and effects the balance between animal welfare stringency and feasibility in labels.

‘We do have intrinsic motivation but do not give us too much credit. Because, at the same time, you can also criticize us for not removing the bottom. We try to raise the bar on the top and create a ladder for the consumers to climb but, at the end of the day, we are a company.’ – Coop DK

As opposed to animal welfare organizations, retailers do not have supporters that are very much focused on ethical considerations. This allows retailers to be open to NGOs and/or governments in finding balance between feasibility and animal welfare stringency. Fortunately, the sustainability discourse of retailers is now quite common and reflects the increasing ‘normalization’ of ethical questions linked to animal welfare in the chain of production.

4.3 Power resources and stakeholders’ interdependence

The analysis also highlighted that the third instrument that stakeholders use in order to operate the tension between feasibility and animal welfare stringency, is their individual and combined resources of power. Power resources can be material (e.g. financial means and labor) or immaterial (e.g. symbolic power through name and association). Over the course of the analysis, it became apparent that the different stakeholders involved in animal welfare labels possess distinct power resources that are strategically used in discussions and have an impact on the balance between feasibility and animal welfare stringency. The main reason as to why these power resources can have such an impact on this balance within the labels, is because the stakeholders depend on each other’s power resources in order to establish the label and its credibility in the market. According to Boström (2006), credibility can be defined as: *‘perceptions and assumptions that the operations of an actor or agent are trustworthy, responsible, desirable, and appropriate’*. In the context of animal welfare labels, this understanding of credibility cannot be achieved without all of the partners contributing their individual power resources. As such, the credibility of animal welfare labels is heavily dependent on the variety of stakeholders and distinct types of resources that they bring to the cooperation. Yet, as was also mentioned in the previous section, this large variety of stakeholders and power resources is associated with different goals and motivations that influence the balance between feasibility and animal welfare stringency. A number of power resources that have an impact on the tension between feasibility and animal welfare stringency were identified for each type of stakeholder.

The symbolic power resources of NGOs

NGOs, such as animal welfare organizations in our cases, typically do not possess a lot of financial resources compared to the other actors. Therefore, NGOs need other types of power resources in order to further their agendas on animal welfare and to exert their influence. Contrary to financial resources, the analysis showed that animal welfare organizations do

possess quite a few symbolic resources. These symbolic resources include: expert knowledge, a well-known logo and name that are associated with a good reputation, and moral authority.

Expert knowledge refers to the specific knowledge that animal welfare organizations have developed over the years on the topic of animal welfare. Whereas animal welfare organizations are not the sole actors with knowledge on this topic, they are part of the select group of actors who exclusively focus on animal welfare. This makes them credible experts in the eyes of many (potential) consumers. The interviewed market actors and governments also recognized this and attributed this notion of expert knowledge to the NGOs. A quote by the Dutch retailer Albert Heijn further illustrates this idea:

‘The Dierenbescherming has a lot of knowledge on animal welfare and people know this. You also notice this because they are a party that works from substance and knowledge during discussions on the specific criteria. Yet, they are also open to listening to others. This makes working with them very valuable.’ – Albert Heijn

The Dutch NGO, Dierenbescherming, added to this:

‘We are tough when it comes to the substance and the criteria, but soft when it comes to the relationships.’ - Dierenbescherming

Secondly, the NGOs in this study were aware of and relied on the power of the logo and name that they developed and that they bring to the table to influence the negotiations during the process of the creation of the label. An example of the impact that a well-known name and logo can have on a label, came from RSPCA Assured:

‘When we started the label back in 1994, we weren’t called RSPCA Assured. Our first name was Freedom Food. When the name of our label was Freedom Food, we only had 24% recognition from customers. We changed the name to RSPCA Assured, and now we have 60% recognition from customers. To consumers, RSPCA equals animal welfare.’ – RSPCA Assured

In addition to this example, it came forward in the analysis how the attachment of the name of these non-profit organizations to labels can have a positive impact on animal welfare labels. This also appeared in the case of the Danish label where the name of the Danish animal welfare

organization DOSO is publicly used on websites and in pamphlets in order to indicate to consumers and producers that an animal welfare organization supports the label.

Thirdly, animal welfare organizations are perceived to have moral authority with regards to animal welfare issues. These NGOs have a normative function in society and are associated with high moral standards through their embodiment of universally regarded good values (Boli & Thomas, 1999). This moral authority was one of the reasons why the market actors and governments did not believe that they could effectively establish a label without the involvement of an animal welfare NGO. An interesting example came from the Danish governmental label. As mentioned previously, the biggest animal welfare organization of Denmark (Dyrenes Beskyttelse) “decided” to leave the creation process of the label together with the retailer Coop DK. However, the Danish government realized that they could not create a successful animal welfare label without the involvement of an animal welfare organization. In order to mitigate the absence of Dyrenes Beskyttelse, the Danish government approached another animal welfare organization, The Organization for Cooperation of Animal Welfare Groups (DOSO). DOSO is now listed on the website of the Bedre Dyrevelfærd label as the animal welfare organization that endorses the label. The Danish government commented on this as follows:

‘Dyrenes Beskyttelse left. But we now have another animal welfare organization in the partnership. DOSO is still a part of it so we do have animal welfare representatives, which are needed.’ – Danish government

This “need” for the involvement of NGOs in the process of the label’s creation is associated with their moral authority in society. The moral authority of animal welfare organizations also means that they potentially have the latent power to direct bad publicity towards market actors and governments with regards to their actions and standpoints on animal welfare. At the same time, as is the case for the NGOs involved in this study, this latent power can also work in the opposite direction by supporting market actors and governments in their standpoints on animal welfare.

Hence, even though NGOs, such as animal welfare organizations, do not have a lot of financial means, their power resources are just as valuable. Through their expert knowledge, well-known names and logos, and moral authority, NGOs are able to influence the degree of animal welfare within a label as, without their support, the label will be less credible and trustworthy in the eyes of consumers. The other stakeholders appear to accept this reasoning

and become willing to take a risk with regards to the feasibility of a label. A concrete example of this came from the case of the Dutch label, Beter Leven Keurmerk:

‘The sector for pig meat was quite difficult. When we wanted to move pig farmers to produce in a manner with higher animal welfare, we needed someone who was willing to try and sell this meat. This became Albert Heijn, who was willing to try and stick their necks out. In the beginning, Albert Heijn carried the financial burden of making the adjustments.’ – Dierenbescherming

Whereas this example also highlights the need for the willingness of market actors, it shows how the power resources of NGOs are able to influence and push market actors to take a risk with regards to feasibility and pursue higher animal welfare standards.

Market actors as powerful gatekeepers

In addition to NGOs, market actors, retailers in this study, also have their own specific set of power resources that they make use of during the different phases of the label’s development, namely: financial resources, market access, and influence on the chain of production. As opposed to NGOs, market actors do tend to have quite a lot of financial resources. This could have meant that the power balance between the market actors and the NGOs, and the tension between the label’s feasibility and animal welfare stringency could have become distorted. However, the analysis did not find this to be the case. The financial resources of market actors did not play a major role in the organization and selection of criteria for the labels as the labels were typically housed by an organization specifically created to manage the label. These foundations often rely on the mandatory contributions that producers pay in order to be a part of the labeling scheme. For example, the RSPCA Assured and Foundation Beter Leven Keurmerk are both organizations that are separate from the animal welfare NGOs and focus solely on managing the labels. This limits the influence of the financial resources of market actors on the balance between feasibility and animal welfare stringency. The power resources of market actors that did play a significant part in managing the tension between feasibility and animal welfare stringency, were the market access of the market actors and their influence on the chain of production.

The retailers, representing the market actors of this research, can be regarded as gatekeepers to both the rest of the market and the chain of production within it. In the countries of origin of the labels that were studied, retailers hold a lot of power in that regard and what

they say or do goes. In other words, the retailers have a lot of influence over other market actors and producers. An example of this came from the German retailer Lidl, *Haltungsform*:

*‘We started the *Haltungskompass* and then, after it became a success, different companies like Rewe, Penny, Aldi, and Netto came out with their own *Haltungskompass*. The names were a little different and the graphic designs were a little different but the categories of animal welfare were basically the same. After half a year, we discussed within the Initiative Tierwohl² the idea of merging to one general label, the *Haltungsform*. The *Haltungsform* happened and it became a success.’ – Lidl Deutschland*

This example shows that Lidl Deutschland, as one of the biggest retailers in Germany, had the power to re-organize the entire market of sustainable animal products and implement the *Haltungsform* within 2,5 years due to their power resources. These power resources of market actors can also affect the balance between feasibility and animal welfare stringency. This effect can be positive or negative for the feasibility and animal welfare stringency of the label. On the one hand, a positive example comes from RSPCA Assured:

‘Lidl and Aldi are really big supporters of RSPCA Assured. Because they joined, they made other supermarkets look up and think that they should also be a part of this. Because of them, M&S now do all of the milk with RSPCA Assured welfare standards. Before they joined the label, there was a drop in their milk sales and after they joined the sales went back up. Of course, there are issues sometimes but the supermarkets who join can show others: ‘look, it’s fine to join’.’ – RSPCA Assured

Because a group of retailers were supportive of RSPCA Assured and showed that it could work, others believed that they should follow their example. On the other hand, two negative examples come from the Dutch *Beter Leven Keurmerk* and the Danish *Bedre Dyrevelfærd*:

*‘We already know that we are never going to achieve the criteria for one star of the *Beter Leven Keurmerk* for all chickens. It was easy with pigs but for chickens it won’t happen. There is not*

² Initiative Tierwohl is an NGO that represents an alliance between retailers, the agricultural sector and slaughterhouses to improve animal welfare for animals in the chain of production.

enough space and it is too expensive. The Dierenbescherming won't lower the criteria and in this way, raising the bottom this way for chickens won't happen.' – Albert Heijn

Because Albert Heijn believes that the criteria for chickens are too high to be feasible (even though 1 star is the lowest level) and the animal welfare NGO the Dierenbescherming does not want to compromise on animal welfare, the situation for chickens is not improving. This confirms the position of these market actors as gatekeepers who can strongly affect the initial and constant tension between the feasibility of the label and the stringency of its criteria.

'Danish crown have stopped to produce one heart pig. Consumers won't buy it because the price is too high and if the producers see that consumers aren't buying it, they just stop. There haven't really been improvements for pigs since then.' – DOSO

The Danish government elaborated on this by stating:

'The retailers agree on the price with the producers. In the beginning, pork with one heart was quite successful but, after a while, the retailers and producers made the price higher and now consumers don't really buy it anymore.' – Danish government

The retailers and producers raised the price in order to compensate for the higher costs of production of the pork with better animal welfare. This is a concrete example of how the very feasibility of the label can become a barrier that obstructs animal welfare stringency due to the power resources of market actors who can decide to pursue or stop the development of the label.

Governmental power: beyond legislation

Finally, governments also have three main sources of power, namely: financial resources, authority, and legislation. Similarly to the market actors, the analysis confirmed that the financial resources of governments did not play a major role in the tension between feasibility and animal welfare stringency. However, the power of authority and legislation did.

The different country cases investigated in this study highlighted the diversity of ways in which governments use their power of authority. In the case of RSPCA Assured, the British government recognized the label as a credible label through an accreditation scheme and thus provided it with an additional sense of legitimacy. In the Netherlands and Germany, the government did not actively endorse or support the labels but also did not diminish them and

this did not impact the success of the labels. In the case of the Danish governmental label, the Danish government used its authority in a more direct manner by being the initiator of the label and chairing the meetings and discussions on the development of the label with stakeholders. Eventually, this authoritative power was also used to have the final word on the criteria and this led to the ‘‘departure’’ of the retailer Coop DK and the biggest animal welfare organization in Denmark. The cause for the initial rift between Coop DK, the animal welfare organization, and the Danish government was that the latter used its authoritative power to lower the standards for animal welfare in order to achieve higher chances of feasibility:

‘We were stuck on a few criteria and, eventually, the minister made a decision and said that who can get on board with the final criteria can stay, and who cannot join them, should go. That is when Coop DK and the animal welfare organization left. The government has the authority to say this it or go. Otherwise you could discuss for years.’ – DOSO

Whilst it can be argued that this strong display of authoritative power was counterproductive, it can also be problematic when governments do not use their authoritative power. For example, the Haltungsform in Germany was essentially the result of the German government actually being unable to put its authoritative power into practice before a market actor, retailer Lidl Germany, took over and created the label by itself:

‘The system failed completely. We were very disappointed but decided to find a way to take advantage of the momentum and come up with a label of our own. The government had decided to follow this path but didn’t conclude with a concrete system or label. For governments, it’s much more difficult to do something like a label. Governments have to see what systems are available, gain support from different groups, use government agencies etcetera. At Lidl, we were able to make the decisions really quickly.’ – Lidl Deutschland

In addition to the power of authority, governments provide the legal framework for animal welfare in a country and may or may not legitimize and/or support animal welfare initiatives such as labels. Through their legislative function and power, governments have an impact on the balance between feasibility and animal welfare stringency even without being actively involved in the creation and implementation of a label. This effect is most clearly observed when looking at the criteria of the labels in the four different countries. Even though all countries are part of Northwestern Europe and show many cultural similarities, the legal

requirements that governments have set with regards to animal welfare are not exactly the same. As animal welfare labels are often times an attempt to raise the bottom and reward animal welfare standards that are above the legal requirements, legislation has a direct impact on the criteria of the labels. This means that the lower the national legislation is in terms of ambition towards animal welfare, the lower the starting point for the national label's selected criteria will usually be. For example, the Dutch label Beter Leven Keurmerk level 1 for pork, is comparable to the German Haltungsform level 2, and the Beter Leven Keurmerk 2 for eggs is comparable to the Haltungsform level 3. This direct impact that governments have on the balance between feasibility and animal welfare stringency is also reflected in the call of both NGOs and market actors to set higher legislative standards:

'A government intervention could be really good. Through legislation, the government could immediately bring the standards up for lots of animals. Or they could provide short-term support to improve animal welfare.' - Tesco

One of the only cases in which a government was actively involved in the creation and implementation of label, came from the Danish Bedre Dyrevelfærd label. During the creation of the Bedre Dyrevelfærd label, the Danish retailer Coop and the largest animal welfare organization of Denmark (Dyrenes Beskyttelse) "left" the partnership. The reason why Coop DK decided to leave the label is not completely clear as the Danish government and Coop DK tell different stories:

'Two major players joined the first partnership meetings. The biggest animal welfare organization and Coop. They both decided to leave.' – Danish government

'We were kicked out of the process. We didn't get an invitation to continue. We had been to several meetings and at one point we stopped hearing about the other meetings. Then we heard from other people who were part of the partnership that they had continued the discussions without us. We think that we weren't invited anymore because we asked too many critical questions and wanted the standards for the first level for pigs to be higher.' – Coop DK

The Organization for Cooperation of Animal Welfare Groups (DOSO), which was also involved in the creation of the label, provided the following narrative:

‘It was a very bad decision that Coop DK left and made their own label. Coop DK wanted a label with four hearts, they demanded this. Their arguments for that were very weak. We think that the actual reason why Coop DK left the partnership, was the competition between Coop DK and the Salling Group³. We were stuck on a few criteria and, eventually, the minister made a decision and said that who can get on board with the final criteria can stay, and who cannot join them, should go. That is when Coop DK left.’ – DOSO

Whereas it is not possible to conclude which story is completely accurate, we can observe how the Danish government could afford to lose two major stakeholders, an NGO and a market actor, as a result of its position as a government. Whilst NGOs and market actors appear to aim for compromise in order to keep as many stakeholders involved and on board as possible, the Danish government did not have to adhere to this philosophy in this case. The power of the Danish government directly influenced the balance between feasibility and animal welfare stringency as it did not have to elevate its standards as a result of potentially losing stakeholders. This makes the potential impact of the power of a governmental actor unique amongst the other stakeholders.

When we combine all of the power resources of the different stakeholders, the result is a combination of political, market and moral authority. Based on the results of this study, it is fair to conclude that both of these types of authority are necessary to establish a credible animal welfare label. In order to establish this credibility through a combination of political, market and moral authority, NGOs, market actors and governments are dependent on each other to participate in the creation and development of animal welfare labels and use their distinct power resources in order to influence the balance between animal welfare stringency and feasibility.

Discussion and Conclusion

In recent years, the literature on standardization has established how labels constitute sites of contention (Boström, 2006). Labels are multi-stakeholder initiatives made up of actors who may share a common objective of improving animal welfare, but typically do not share the same values and organizing principles which challenges their capacities for cooperation (Verbeke, 2009). By focusing on the tensions that stakeholders involved in the development of labels face and how they are navigated, managed, and overcome, research can better understand how standards are used as specific market instruments to further sustainability objectives

³ The Salling Group is Denmark’s largest retail group.

(Grunert, Hieke & Wills, 2014). In order to contribute to this understanding, this study aimed to answer the following research question: *'How do NGOs, market actors and governments successfully manage the tension between a label's feasibility and stringency in animal welfare labels in Northwestern Europe?'* Based on the analysis, three instruments were identified that NGOs, market actors, and governments employ in order to manage this tension, namely: time, identity, and power resources. Two of the most prominent findings that became apparent from these instruments and their implications for research in the area will be highlighted in the following paragraphs.

Firstly, whereas this study confirmed that market actors such as retailers have a strong focus on feasibility in animal welfare labels (Schulze, Spiller & Risius, 2019), it was also found that this focus is mitigated by their ambiguous identity and their cooperation with other stakeholders. This is a new insight that was not previously mentioned in the academic literature and provides nuance to the position of retailers in the market and with regards to animal welfare labels. Even though market innovations such as labels are accompanied by risks, market actors are willing to take these risks as they are not the only ones bearing them and they also grow aware that these innovations are necessary in a context of increasing discussions on sustainability and societal interest in the issues related to it. Through the influence of NGOs, such as animal welfare organizations and the cooperation with these NGOs, retailers have proven themselves to be willing and able to compromise on feasibility in order to further the cause of improving animal welfare. In this sense, retailers shape the market but the retailers themselves are also shaped by these partners entering this market, namely NGOs.

Secondly, the involvement of governments was found to be reliant on the role they chose for themselves. In the Danish case, the government was the most actively involved with the label while also being the initiator. It could be clearly observed how the Danish government used its power resources in order to create and implement a certain type of label by not conforming to the demands of a number of stakeholders for higher animal welfare criteria. In this sense, the Danish government made a clear decision to lower the animal welfare stringency in order to promote the label's feasibility. However, even in the cases where the government did not participate in an active manner, the actor still had a direct and initial influence on the creation and implementation of the label through its legislative power. Indeed, as the primary foundation of the labels' criteria was based on 'raising the bottom', the basic legal requirements for animal welfare were always used as the starting point for the criteria selection and hence the degree of initial stringency. In other words, a country's specific legal requirements for animal welfare were of great influence on the final criteria selected for the labels. Thus, the role

of governments is quite different to the roles that NGOs and market actors play and, even without active involvement, results in quite a direct influence on the feasibility and animal welfare stringency of labels.

In addition to these academic findings, the results of this study also have practical implications. Predominantly, current and future stakeholders in animal welfare labels can learn from these results how the tension between feasibility and animal welfare stringency was managed in other collaborations. These insights can then be valuable in balancing this tension in other cooperations. In this sense, this study also chose a different approach from other studies. A number of previous studies (e.g. Franz, von Meyer and Spiller, 2010) have had a tendency to focus on the negative aspects of the cooperations by studying what went wrong. However, this study, whilst acknowledging that labelling schemes are prone to contention, has embarked to explore how this tension is managed by stakeholders involved in successful labelling cases. Furthermore, the results of this study can contribute to the current exploration of a European wide label aimed at providing consumers with more insight into the methods of production of animal products. In order to make a European label successful, the insights of this study could potentially shed some light on the difficulties, obstacles and related potential avenues for managing the tension between feasibility and animal welfare stringency on such a large scale. Additionally, the creation of such a label could also be an interesting case in itself for future studies in order to further explore how tensions are managed in multi-stakeholder collaborations in other areas such as environmental preservation.

Similarly to other studies, this study also had a number of limitations. As a result of the unexpected pandemic, none of the interviews could be conducted in a face-to-face manner. Technology provided a solution but the dynamics that exist when conversing in person were still limited. This may have had an impact on the interviews and, thus, the results. Moreover, this study made use of five different case studies. This is a lot of cases and more interviews and other types of data collection techniques could have been used in order to understand the cases even better. Furthermore, all of these cases were interesting and complicated enough to have been studied on their own and, perhaps, this could also be done in the future. Finally, the interviewees of each case knew each other and had worked together in the past or were currently still working together. Since this study focused on a point of contention, the participants may not have been completely open with the interviewer due to not wanting to badmouth the other stakeholders. Future research could study this tension in, for example, workshops with all stakeholders present in order to explore whether this was the case.

This study has shown that, through the use time, identity, and power resources, a large variety of stakeholders can overcome points of contention in order to raise the bottom of animal welfare and push for even higher standards at the top, ultimately furthering and developing the market for sustainable animal products.

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Appendix 1. Interview guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE

PROCEDURE.

This study makes use of snowball sampling. This means that not all interviewees may be contacted in the same manner. However, in general, the interviewees will be contacted via email. A set of prewritten emails was created in order to ensure that all potential interviewees will be contacted with the same information. Due to the Coronavirus, the interviews will be conducted in a different manner than was originally planned. As opposed to the majority of the interviews taking place in person, all interviews will instead be conducted through (video) calling. Video calling is preferred to calls without a visual connection as this allows for a closer replication of face-to-face interviews. Additionally, being able to look at the expressions of an interviewee whilst they are answering a question can be beneficial to understanding the response. If the interviewees are willing to participate through video calling, Microsoft Teams or Skype (interviewee's preference) will be used to conduct the interviews. If an interviewee is not willing to video call, interviews will be conducted over the telephone. With the consent of the interviewees, all interviews will be recorded. The interviewees will be asked about whether they consent to being recorded prior to the actual interview. The application TapeACall will be used to record the telephone interviews and the chosen video calling application will be used to record the video calls. Depending on the length of the answers of the interviewees and the amount of follow-up questions, the interviews will last for approximately an hour.

At the start of the interview, interviewees will be read the following informal text:

‘Thank you again for being willing to participate in my study and helping me graduate! I would like to inform you of a few things before we start with the interview. I mentioned some of these things before but we are going to go over them again, just to be sure. Firstly, for the purpose of being able to analyze the interview, the interview will be recorded with your consent. After the interview has been transcribed, the recording will be deleted. The recording will not be shared with anyone other than myself. The transcript will not be shared with anyone other than myself and, only if absolutely required, my thesis supervisor from Utrecht University. Do you still give your consent to recording the interview? [wait for response] Thank you. Secondly, you are able to withdraw from this study at any given time, if you wish to do so. Thirdly, if, throughout the interview, you do not feel comfortable with answering a question, please let me know and we will skip it. Finally, the interview will last for approximately 45 to 60 minutes and is divided into various sections based on different topics. Do you have any further questions or comments? [answer question/comment if there is one] Great! Let's get started.

After reading the introductory text and answering any questions and/or comments, the actual interview will start. Below is an English version of the questions and a Dutch version of the questions.

QUESTIONS FOR INITIATORS (ENGLISH VERSION)

Part A. The introduction:

- Can you please introduce yourself?

Part B. The creation:

- In your own words, what is the purpose of label X?
- Why was the decision made to choose a label as the means to accomplish this goal?
- After the decision was made to pursue a label, how did the process of creating the label work?
 - a. Did you cooperate with other parties or ask for council during this phase?
 - b. How did you establish the criteria?
 - c. Were you inspired by other labels?
 - d. Did the label change?
 - e. Do the criteria change?

Part C. The implementation:

- According to the website of label X, the label started with **insert parties**. How did you approach these parties (a.k.a. how did you convince them to participate)?
- Why were these specific parties approached?
- What response did you receive from these parties?
- What response did these parties receive from their peers about implementing the label?
- After implementing the label with the initial parties, how did you expand the label?
- What challenges did you and your partners encounter?
- How were these challenges mitigated?
- How did you position the label in the market?

Part D. The impact:

- Do you consider label X to be a success?
 - a. If yes, why do you consider label X a success?
 - b. If no, why not?
 - c. What made label X successful?
- Do you think that label X has had an influence on the market for animal products?
 - a. If yes, what do you think has been the influence of label X on the market?
 - b. If no, why not?
- How do you see the market evolving?
- What trends do you see for the future?

Part E. The ending:

- Is there anything that we have not discussed that you would like to discuss and/or mention?
- In your opinion, who should definitely be interviewed in order to understand how this label X was created and/or implemented?

QUESTIONS FOR INITIATORS (DUTCH VERSION)

Deel A. Kennismaking:

- Zou u zich kort voor willen stellen?

Deel B. De creatie:

- Hoe zou u in uw eigen woorden het doel van label X omschrijven?
- Nadat de beslissing voor een label was gemaakt, hoe is het label verder ontwikkeld?
 - a. Is er samengewerkt met andere partijen en/of om advies gevraagd?
 - b. Hoe zijn de criteria vormgegeven?
 - c. Waren jullie geïnspireerd door andere labels?
 - d. Is het label veranderd?
 - e. Zijn de criteria veranderd?

Deel C. De implementatie:

- Volgens de website is label X begonnen met **partijen invoegen**. Hoe hebben jullie deze partijen benaderd (a.k.a. hoe hebben jullie deze partijen overtuigd om mee te doen)?
- Waarom zijn deze specifieke partijen benaderd?
- Wat waren de initiële reacties van deze partijen?
- Wat voor reacties kregen de partijen van collega's over hun deelname?
- Nadat het label was geïmplementeerd bij de eerste partijen, hoe hebben jullie het label verder uitgebreid?
- Welke uitdagingen kwamen jullie tegen tijdens de implementatie van het label?
- Hoe zijn deze uitdagingen opgelost?
- Hoe is het label in de markt gepositioneerd?

Deel D. De impact:

- Ziet u label X als een succes?
 - a. Zo ja, waarom is label X succesvol?
 - b. Zo nee, waarom niet?
- Denkt u dat label X impact heeft gehad op de markt?
 - a. Zo ja, wat voor invloed?
 - b. Zo nee, waarom niet?
- Hoe ziet u de markt zich ontwikkelen?
- Welke trends ziet u voor de toekomst?

Deel E. De afronding:

- Is er iets wat niet ter sprake is gekomen wat u nog zou willen benoemen en/of bespreken?
- Volgens u, wie zou ik zeker nog moeten interviewen om te begrijpen hoe label X tot stand is gekomen en is geïmplementeerd?

Part A. Getting to know the interviewee:

- Can you please introduce yourself?

Part B. The label:

- In your own words, what is the purpose of label X?
- How did you and your place of employment become involved with label X?
- Why did you and your place of employment become involved with label X?
- Was the purpose of label X already important to you before the involvement with label X?
- Did you have any hesitations about joining label X?

Part C. The implementation:

- What was the general reaction when your organization got involved with label X?
- What did becoming involved with label X mean for your organization?
- How was the cooperation with the initiator of label X?
- Did you encounter any challenges?
 - a. If so, what challenges?
 - b. If not, why do you think did you not encounter any challenges?
- How was the label positioned in the market?

Part D. The impact:

- Do you consider label X to be a success?
 - a. If yes, why do you consider label X a success?
 - b. If no, why not?
 - c. What made label X successful?
- Do you think that label X has had an impact on the market?
 - a. If yes, what kind of impact has label X had on the market?
 - b. If no, why not?
- Has being involved with label X had a positive effect on your organization?
- How do you see the market evolving?
- What trends do you see for the future?

Part E. The ending:

- Is there anything that we have not discussed that you would like to discuss and/or mention?
- In your opinion, who should definitely be interviewed in order to understand how this label X was created and/or implemented?

QUESTIONS FOR PARTNERS (DUTCH VERSION)

Deel A. Kennismaking:

- Zou u zich kort voor willen stellen?

Part B. Het label:

- Hoe zou u in uw eigen woorden het doel van label X omschrijven?
- Hoe zijn u en uw organisatie betrokken geraakt bij label X?
- Waarom zijn u en uw organisatie betrokken geraakt bij label X?
- Vond u het doel van label X al belangrijk voordat u betrokken raakte bij het label?
- Waren er twijfels over betrokkenheid bij label X?

Part C. De implementatie:

- Wat was de algemene reactie op de betrokkenheid van uw organisatie bij label X?
- Wat betekende de betrokkenheid van uw organisatie bij label X voor uw organisatie?
- Hoe was de samenwerking met de oprichter van label X?
- Bent u uitdaging tegengekomen?
 - a. Zo ja, welke?
 - b. Zo nee, hoe denkt u dat het komt dat deze er niet waren?
- Hoe is het label in de markt gepositioneerd?

Part D. De impact:

- Ziet u label X als een succes?
 - a. Zo ja, waarom is label X succesvol?
 - b. Zo nee, waarom niet?
- Denkt u dat label X een impact heeft gehad op de markt voor dierlijke producten?
 - a. Zo ja, wat denkt u dat de invloed van label X is geweest op de markt?
 - b. Zo nee, waarom niet?
- Heeft uw betrokkenheid bij label X een positieve impact gehad op uw organisatie?
- Hoe ziet u de markt zich ontwikkelen?
- Welke trends ziet u voor de toekomst?

Deel E. De afronding:

- Is er iets wat niet ter sprake is gekomen wat u nog zou willen benoemen en/of bespreken?
- Volgens u, wie zou ik zeker nog moeten interviewen om te begrijpen hoe label X tot stand is gekomen en is geïmplementeerd?

Referral e-mail

In December 2020, the Dutch minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality will host a conference on the topic of furthering the market for sustainable animal products within Northwestern Europe. In preparation for this conference, I am conducting my MSc thesis on behalf of the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality on the market for sustainable animal products and sustainability labels in Northwest European countries. For the purpose of this study and the conference, I would like to learn more about your perspective on the market for sustainable animal products and label X in country X. Would you be willing to engage in such a conversation with me regarding these topics?

Appendix 2. Overview of the data structure

