

Analysis of the Swiss policies bearing on the food system

A NRP 69 research group analysed agricultural policies, food safety and public health policies, i.e. the policy fields that determine how Switzerland's food system is regulated. Their policy analysis concluded that Swiss food safety policies and public health policies pursue essentially coherent goals. In the much longer established field of agricultural policies, there are various conflicting interests.

a. Fritz Sager et al., Cross-sectional policy analysis. NRP 69

Switzerland's food system is largely shaped by three different policy fields: agricultural policies, food safety requirements and public health policies. As part of NRP 69, a policy analysis^a was conducted to examine these three areas. The researchers were interested in the problems that policies aim to address, as well as the concrete measures employed for this purpose. They distinguished three types of measures: regulations that impose negative sanctions for non-compliance, positive incentives and information measures. This chapter summarises the results of their analysis.

Agricultural policies with different goals

Agricultural policies come at the beginning of the food system's value creation chain. In Switzerland, policies regulate food production in a variety of ways. The two main ways are incentives in the form of subsidies and regulations. Informal measures such as information campaigns are rare.

Many agricultural policy measures pursue several goals simultaneously. For example, food production is supported through subsidies. Other subsidies are used to encourage the conservation of natural resources and animal welfare.

The important role of subsidies and regulations and the multitude of objectives they pursue can be traced back to the long history of Swiss agricultural policies and the strong role of the federal government.

There are political instruments employed in agricultural policies that aim at limiting the environmental impact of agricultural production. The instruments used to pursue this goal are relatively new and/or of a rather non-binding nature.

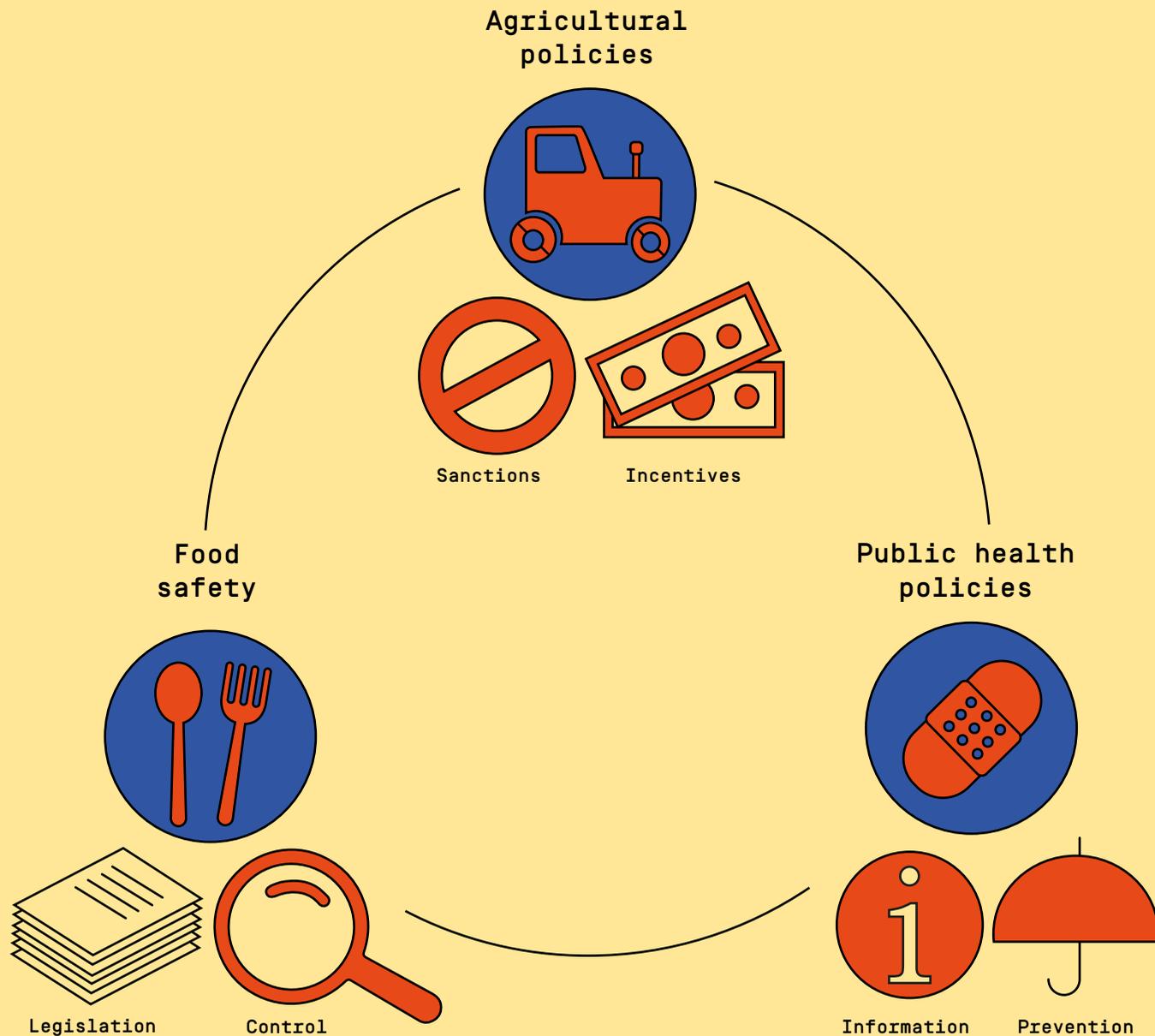
Coherent food safety policy

As a policy field, food safety embraces all measures intended to ensure that food can be consumed safely. Such measures cover the entire food value chain, from food production and distribution through to consumption. Food safety is primarily guaranteed by strict legislation and control systems. Swiss food safety policies are relatively coherent and the Swiss regulation is fully harmonised with the EU.

The Swiss food system

Switzerland's food system is largely shaped by three different policy fields.

Agricultural policies, food safety requirements and public health policies employ different measures to address the problems in these areas.



Measures to promote healthy eating

Since large parts of public health represent new policy fields in Switzerland and are still finding their feet, not many instruments are yet in place. This may be a reason why most efforts to promote a healthy diet are information driven²³. The information campaigns aim to strengthen consumers' awareness of the need to eat healthily and give them the skills to do so.

Responsibility for health promotion in federal Switzerland lies largely with the cantons. The Swiss Nutrition Strategy 2017-2024²⁴ contains no regulations and incentives to establish framework conditions that are conducive to healthy eating. As a result, existing health policy measures are substantially less binding in nature than measures implemented in agricultural or food safety policies.

In Switzerland generally only a few regulations and incentives target consumers directly. A limited statutory basis prevents the federal government from playing a more active role in public health. This means that government agencies must rely on the voluntary cooperation of both the industry and the Cantons in their efforts to encourage healthy eating decisions.

Hence, public health policies that actively foster healthy nutrition are less developed in Switzerland.

The EU has had a comprehensive, non-mandatory strategy on nutrition, overweight and obesity-related health issues since 2007. A European initiative, validated amongst others by Switzerland, was also recently launched to reduce the amount of sugar in processed foods²⁵.

Conflicting interests in the Swiss food system's policies

The researchers' policy analysis showed that Swiss food safety and public health policies pursue essentially coherent goals. No major conflicts were identified, either within the individual policy fields or in interaction with other areas. In addition, there are no conflicts in terms of Switzerland's international obligations towards the European Union.

Swiss agricultural policies are less coherent. Here, the policy analysis brought several potential areas of conflict to light. For instance, agricultural policies pursue two quite different objectives. The first is to increase access to foreign markets. In pursuit of this goal, agreements were negotiated with the European Union on partly eliminating or reducing customs tariffs, for example. Switzerland also has free trade agreements with individual states.

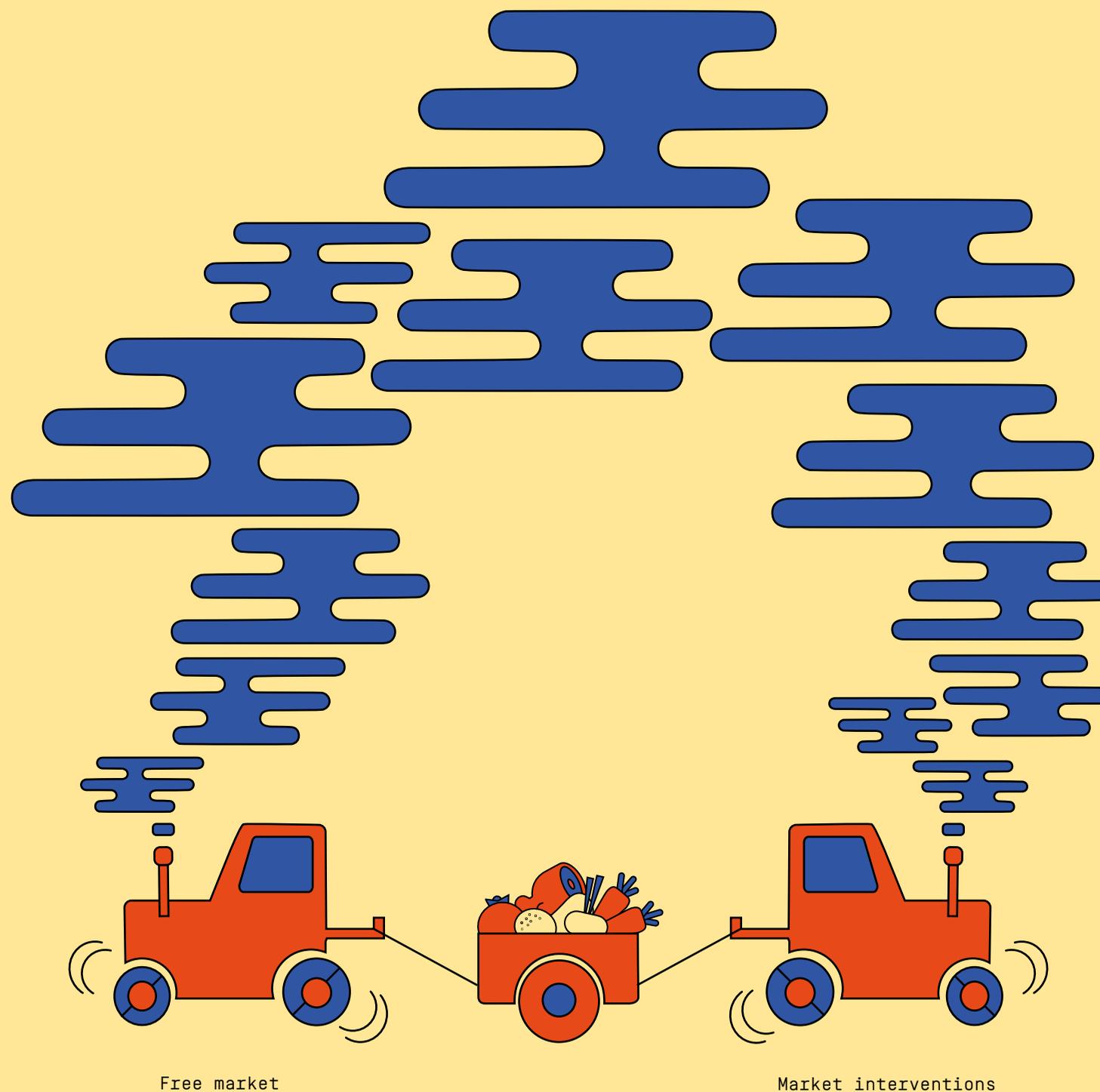
However, at the same time, the federal government imposes a strict regulatory framework on Swiss agriculture and makes corrective interventions in the market. This latter occurs, for example, when farmers have to comply with certain environmental standards. As a result of these partially incoherent agricultural policy goals, individual measures need to be continually coordinated.

On the one hand, the government wants Swiss agriculture to be able to compete effectively in the European single market, yet on the other, it uses comparatively stringent regulations to protect domestic producers and the environment. Political goals have to be constantly adapted to accommodate these incoherencies.

There is thus a conflict between foreign trade and common market. Such conflicts arise for example when agricultural policies set out to secure supplies of agricultural produce while at the same time demanding higher environmental standards – in both cases with free market conditions as the underlying premise. Such conflicts in agricultural policies have to be kept carefully balanced.

The researchers regard the numerous cooperation ventures with private-sector partners in all three policy areas – agriculture, food safety and public health – as a further source of political tensions: Stakeholders such as processing companies, major retailers or pressure groups – for example environmental organisations, farming associations or health organisations – play a major role in developing and implementing political measures. Tensions can arise during partnerships. This calls for continual coordination by the state.

Points of tension in Swiss agricultural policies

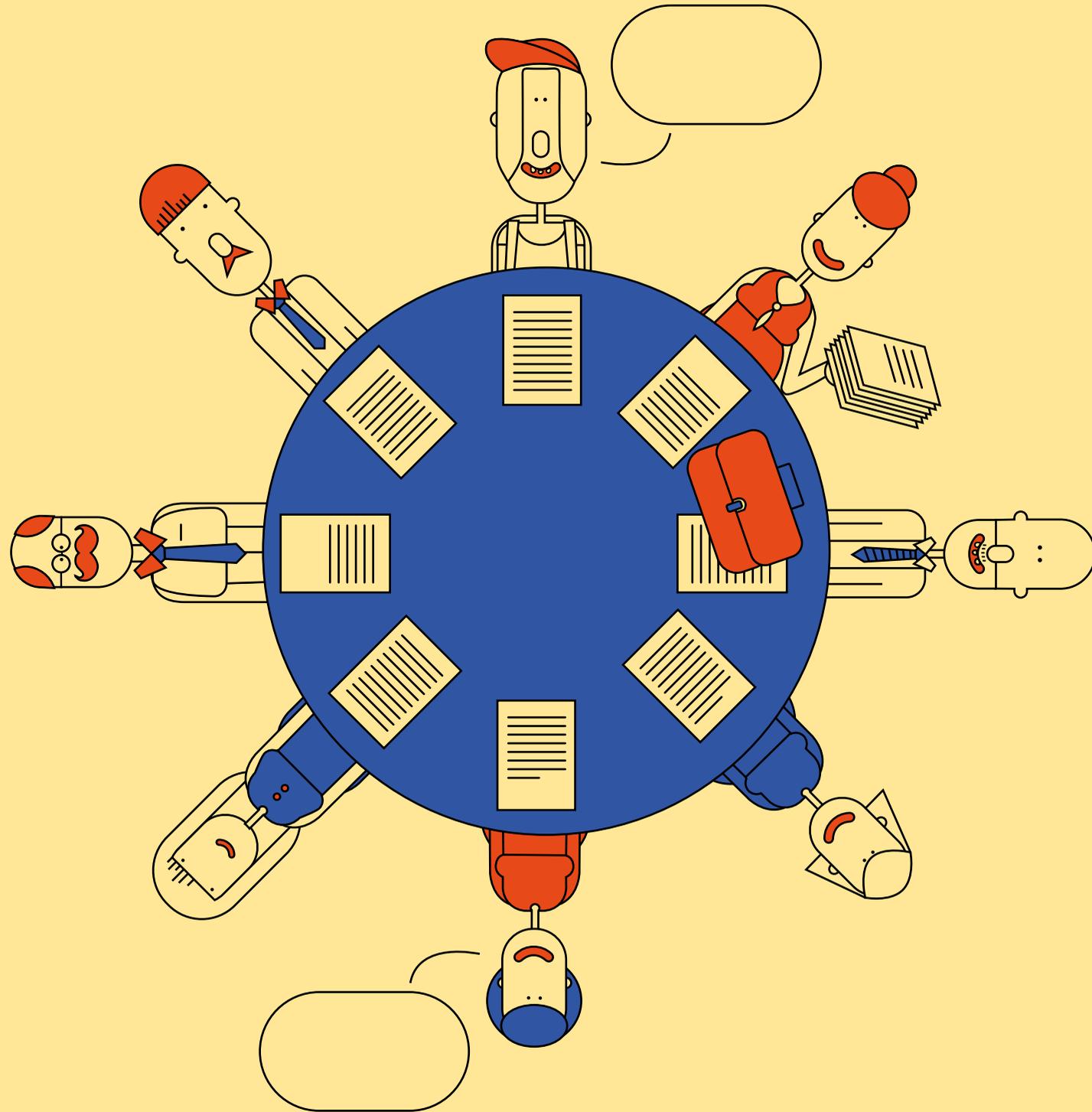


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the other, it uses comparatively stringent regulations to protect domestic producers and the environment. Political goals have to be constantly adapted to accommodate these incoherencies.

Involve consumers

Consumers' influence on political decisions affecting the food system is still limited. In order to involve all parties affected, the administration and political bodies should involve consumers' representatives in policy decisions at the same level they involve food producers and industry representatives when shaping the future Swiss food system.



Greater say for consumers in decisions affecting the food system

b. Jean-Philippe Leresche et al., Access for citizen-consumers to decisions relating to the sustainability of food systems. NRP 69

The NRP 69 “Citizen consumer” project^b revealed that, although consumers have more influence on nutrition than ever before, their influence on political decisions affecting the food system is still limited.

The research group recommends various measures to increase consumers' influence on nutrition-related political decisions. These include extending the right of appeal to consumer protection organisations and giving consumers the right to file class actions. The researchers also suggest that the State could give consumers a greater role in public duties, for example in contributing to specific food inspection tasks as already done on communal level or in creating new entities that could constitute a platform for closer cooperation between consumers and politics.