

## Green Connections and Emotional Wellbeing: Sustainability as a Factor of Occupational (Dis)Satisfaction in Catering

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### Abstract

Catering in Finland and Sweden constitutes a large industry serving annually 800 million meals and 1,9 billion meals, respectively. On the sector public caterers constitute an influential professional subgroup responding to political pressures for sustainability and illustrating the use of local, organic and fairly traded food. However, heavy cost pressures and currently dilemmatic interpretations of sustainability present public caterers as objects of cultural expectations and arouse their emotions in terms of sustainability in professional environments. This paper highlights caterers' 'emotional life-world' due to their green connections as a micro-sociological phenomenon. The paper investigates how professional emotions as a social force promote structural changes within food systems, as local, organic or environmental interpretations of sustainable food gain preference. In-depth interviews with 16 Finnish caterers were extracted into three exemplary cases of a happy caterer, procuring organic and highly local food, a 'luke-warm' contract caterer moving after the trendy demand and a stressed caterer, looking for scientific evidence for sustainability. The caterers' emotional wellbeing was clearly affected by their green connections, whereby both positive and negative emotions were seen to drive towards sustainable catering, albeit differently interpreted; either as a local and organic or an environmental-technical orientation

**Keywords:** *Public caterer, sustainability, emotional wellbeing, food system*

### 1 Introduction

Caterers are a professional group responsible for the procurement of food and its mass scale processing into meals, served in public spaces such as schools, hospitals and office environments. The direct contact with food and issues pertaining to food such as organizational changes in catering, fluctuations in food prices, food safety, availability of food, production mode and sustainability of food as well as customer satisfaction in meals strongly label the professional catering experience. In UK, food procured into catering process elicited unhappy professional comments by a catering manager: "...every four or five years, you had to keep tendering. So every time it was tendered, the prices were driven down. So the food items were driven down. And with that, the quality went down. And it got to the point that you were embarrassed by some of the things that were coming in" (Morgan & Sonnino, 2008, 105). Another British stakeholder was happy to maintain that "...our schools remain as committed as ever to healthy school meals, as part of our wider determination to improve the health of young people. With more than three years of experience with the menus, children, parents, and staff now view healthy, freshly cooked food as the norm and don't expect to see anything different on their plates. The success of our school meals has been achieved through the tremendous dedication and commitment of staff and schools, and with great support from parents and children. We are extremely proud of what's been achieved...and of the impact that our success has had on school meals across the country" (Morgan & Sonnino, 2008, 105).

In welfare states such as Finland and Sweden, a fairly large professional group of public caterers, based in central and satellite kitchens, provide their customers daily with statutory healthy meals. These count on annual basis more than 800 million meals in Finland and 1,9 billion in Sweden (Delfi Marknadspartner, 2008). The public caterers work as "street level bureaucrats", delivering the nutritional benefits of welfare state to their customers (National nutrition recommendations,

2005); it is on them that the success of this endeavour to large extent depends (Rothstein, 1998). Beck (1994, 47-52) identifies professionals to “possess the productive intelligence and the power to arrange things in society”. However, he also sees that penetration of ecological issues into occupational fields may also cause “controversies over methods, procedures, norms, plans and routines”, whereby professionals experience “ecological splits” (Beck, 1994, 47-52). During last decades, emotions have been seen to be connected with rational behaviour and dynamics in working life, as they are perceived as social forces, directed towards particular goals (Turner & Stets, 2005). The caterers can be understood as individuals with their own work goals within their organizations and they want to put these into context; the ability to do this is associated with occupational wellbeing (Hyvönen, 2011; Morgan & Sonnino, 2008).

Public caterers as a professional group seem to deal with a dilemmatic issue when they like to see themselves as stakeholders in catering for sustainability (Post & Mikkola, 2012), in service for the “Green State” (Morgan & Sonnino, 2008). The caterers obviously look for best value for money in their procurement (Bergström et al., 2005) as welfare states currently operate under severe economic pressures (Rothstein, 1998). However, the caterers meet additional pressures to provide their customers with ecological and sustainable meals. These expectations are represented by generic sustainability discourse (Mikkola & Risku-Norja, 2012) and by policy guidelines, often emphasising the use of organic food by catering industry (CEC, 2004; ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability & Ecoinstitut Barcelona, 2008a,b; Mikkola, 2009). Furthermore, public caterers seem to have more or less developed professional identity for sustainability, whereby they feel themselves responsible for procuring and processing food they consider to represent sustainability (Mikkola, 2009). These activities evoke positive professional identities such as balanced, co-operative and rule-abiding ones, but also create negatively coloured identities due to perceived failures in promoting sustainability; caterers are juggling with, critical of and delimited towards sustainability orientations (Mikkola, 2009).

To understand better the caterers’ emotional wellbeing in their professional contexts, and the trajectories of this emotional dynamics for catering for sustainability, this paper explores the ‘emotional life-world’ due to green connections by caterers. As dynamics of emotions are seen to represent ‘social force’ “binding people together and generating commitments to large-scale social and cultural structures”, thus linking “micro and macro levels of social reality” (Turner & Stets, 2005), they are of particular interest for struggles experienced by caterers when they aim or do not aim at more sustainable food system. The paper probes into following specified research questions:

- What kind of emotions do green connections evoke in caterers’ occupational reality?
- How do these emotions contribute to emotional wellbeing in the profession?
- How do these emotions contribute towards structural changes within food system at large including procurement efforts and supply chains?

The paper deals first with particular theories of sociology of emotions and the collection as well as analysis of data. The results are grouped according to generic categories of happiness in terms of qualities of green connections and their impacts. The results are discussed as to their significance to the catering sector and speculated as effecting on future trajectories of catering for sustainability.

## 2 Emotions for sustainability as ambiguous cultural standards

Catering of school meals elicited pride by an actor and embarrassment by another one, when the actors evaluated their service (Morgan & Sonnino, 2008, 105). These emotions seem to reflect both general and situational identity of caterers, who according to Shott (1979, Turner & Stets, 2005, 107-110) work in their societal positions and take their roles vis-à-vis specific and generalized others. Emotions become aroused when a person finds herself as an object to cultural expectations, and evaluates oneself in terms of alignment with these (Shott, 1979, Turner & Stets, 2005, 107-110). Obviously, a positive evaluation may create pride and a negative one may induce embarrassment. The emotions, linked to social role-taking, are seen as highly reflexive in the sense of Goffman by Turner and Stets (2005). The 'thinking of what is thought about me' entails social control through both positive and negative emotions (Shott, 1979, Turner & Stets, 2005, 107-110). Firstly, emotional dynamics works often towards receipt of positive emotions from others and thereby encourages the keeping within the limits of the normative expectations; secondly, negative emotions entail corrective pressures as compensation of the deviation from normative prescriptions. Social control is according to Shott (1979, Turner & Stets, 2005, 107-110) exerted through self-control whereby judgement of one's performance is the central cognitive approach to emotions.

As emotions are connected with human biology and thus "hardwired", they are ubiquitous but also culturally constrained and more specifically, contextually learned (Turner & Stets, 2005). The several emotional classifications seem to agree about primary emotions such as happiness, fear, anger and sadness (Kemper, 1987, in Turner & Stets, 2005, 11). Intriguingly, for one positive emotion there are three negative ones, and sociological attention often focuses on these basic positive or negative valences or a few key emotions (Turner & Stets, 2005). When caterers evaluate their work in terms of sustainability, there will probably be "ecological splits", meaning that differing approaches to sustainable food or green economy elicit both positive and negative emotions, which are connected particularly with rational action (Turner & Stets, 2005). In terms of ecological or more broadly, sustainable food, caterers express responsibility for sustainable food system (Mikkola, 2009) and their feelings thus have a particular moral tone; this is in alignment with the view of Luhmann (1986), that interest in ethical aspects rises when economic systems come under structural transformations.

Furthermore, emotions such as anger (Averill, 1993, in Turner & Stets, 2005), sympathy (Clark, 1997, in Turner & Stets, 2005), pride and empathy (Shott, 1979, in Turner & Stets, 2005) exhibit strong connections with societal morale, which resonates with caterers' position in public institutions and their possible roles in acting to promote sustainability. All of these emotions are strong promoters of social cohesion and solidarity (Turner & Stets, 2005), which may work towards particular societal orientations related to sustainability. Intriguingly, Plutchik (2002, in Turner & Stets, 2005, 1-25) suggests that pride consists of joy and anger. This combination again fits with the division of 'positive' and 'negative' emotions, which drive caterers' activities towards sustainability within their contexts. The emotions' activity vis-à-vis one's environment is particularly emphasised by Averill (1980, in Turner & Stets, 2005, 65-68), who maintains that emotions are actions, directed at accomplishing social and individual goals. Thus, a person is "angry at something" and "proud at something", depending on the appraising of the situation. In the studies of anger, Averill (1980, in Turner & Stets, 2005, 65-68) found that people were often angry to another person, a human institution or the self. Particularly, people had the right or even duty to become angry at intentional wrongdoing or unintentional misdeeds if these were correctable. Thus, anger was connected with perceived injustice, in the heart of sustainable food

systems, asking to be corrected. This is highly relevant for sustainability, which includes a component of more equitable socio-economic relations and environmental regard. Thus the support which emotions offer for caterers as actor-promoters for sustainability may be considerable both in cases of positive and negative emotions.

Turner (2000, in Turner & Stets, 2005) asserts that primary emotions exhibit levels from low to medium to high-intensity states and Gordon (1989, in Turner & Stets, 2005, 33) suggests, that the emotion culture of modern institutions constitutes generally of emotions of long-term duration and low intensity, and looks for consistency between norms and expressions. In the modern world, emotions are also to be expressed in conformity to the context and situation, and they become more often implied than explicated. Therefore, this paper only divides emotions as positive and negative and tentatively refers to professional pride consisting of joy (happiness) in terms of particular matters and anger at again other matters, possibly in compatible relation to one another. The conditions of public catering as highly regulated normative operations seem to comply with emotions of low-intensity but long duration, suggesting that emotions effecting on the possible societal changes may entail slow developments. The interaction and constructivist understanding of public caterers allows them to be seen as representatives of their organizations and embedded in societal morale of welfare states, which is in principal oriented towards Green States and their sustainable food systems (CEC, 2004; Morgan & Sonnino, 2008).

### **3 Methodology**

Altogether 16 Finnish executive caterers working for large, medium and small catering organizations located in rural, suburban and urban environments were interviewed during 2008-2010. The interview guide dealt with their views about their work and organic, local, conventional and sustainable food. Particularly, they were asked to tell about the joys and worries as well as future plans of their occupational life. This interview guide allowed them to express themselves freely in emotional terms (Fontana & Frey, 1998), and the interviews were understood to consist mainly of talk pertaining to emotional identification rather than emotional displays (Rosenberg, 1990, 1991, in Turner & Stets, 2005, 47). The interview talk thus accounted for mainly cognitive reflexivity, which was permeated by the groundings caterers explicated for their experiences.

The text analysis was tuned for emotional expressions and their groundings pertaining to sustainable food and its various aspects along the food chain, from customers and nutrition to catering processes and procurement to primary producers. The results are condensed in qualitative categories making the emotional status of caterers intelligible in broad terms (Kvale, 1996). In order to offer a nuanced analysis, three different typical cases of the multiple case interviews are reviewed here. The cases represent also “politically elected key figures” (Virtanen, 2001), the caterers who represent widely known catering organizations and their executive managers and experts among professional circles. The notion of ‘celebrity chef’ denotes the influence which can be made on the sector by a well-known professional (Morgan & Sonnino, 2008). The representative cases paint the micro-level reflection of as “what is” and illustrate possible macro-level trajectories of the emotional dynamics on food system as “what may be” (Schofield, 2000).

## 4 Results

In order to frame the caterers' emotions towards sustainability into their contexts, the caterers' societal position and style of operations is shortly reported. The caterers are then divided into three emotional dispositions – happy, 'lukewarm' and stressed – according to their characteristic positive and negative emotions and their factual attributions in terms of sustainability. The emotions are tentatively and broadly identified to include ones such as pride and anger. Finally the emotional dynamics is evaluated in terms of its change potential for sustainability.

### 4.1 Happy caterer

#### Societal position and style of operations

The caterer worked in a small rural municipality, which had recently lost a big industrial player due to bankruptcy, entailing rising unemployment. The customers were children in the day care, pupils and students in local schools and elderly citizens and patients on the public health and social sector, including respective public staff. The caterer had been given free hands in developing the catering by a municipal decision, on the condition that the changes increase the efficiency of the operations. The manager took a developmental focus on the quality of meals. The small local kitchens were given up and a thoroughly modernized central kitchen established; in this connection, the personnel was downsized and more industrially prepared ingredients procured. Particularly, the procurement focused on conventional and organic products which supported local and regional economy from strategic food system perspective. The menus were also renewed and the dishes included more berries, vegetables and meat than previously. The caterer became widely known for his reformist approach to public catering by having raised the standards of the public meal to benefit the customers' satisfaction and health, municipal appeal, regional economy and the environment at large.

#### Positive emotions and their attributions

The caterer felt professional pride in having improved the menu quality in terms of public health of the rural municipality and done this by using procurement strategies benefitting local and regional suppliers. The caterer gained professional recognition for this work both in national and international circles on the catering sector.

*"...the last ten years, we have done developmental work in very determined ways...taking into account the size of the municipality and economic resources, so the developmental efforts done by us, so it is significant, because we are well known in the national circles and to some extent in international circles also...that if you think, and we work on the level where we can, where we are in some matters one of the best among national actors."*

As a friend of authentic healthy food, the caterer set to promote improved quality of meals served for young people at schools, elderly people in nursing homes and patients in local health care centres as well as staff of these public institutions. Overweight, diabetes and inflammatory diseases of citizens caused financial losses, which were increasing as the population grew older. The caterer maintained that there is generic evidence on national and international levels about the significance of nutrition in preventing illnesses. Particularly flavonoids, phenolic compounds and fibers were important for health. In the municipal catering the use of berries, fruits and vegetables was increased up to 20% above the average. As general rule, the caterer found that all humans need is included in the very basic ingredients, not necessarily yet scientifically evidenced.

The caterer also was impressed by the results which were achieved by individual nutritional measures among their own clientele.

*“We try to deliver the best possible result for the municipality through food and nutritional measures...this is how we can create savings in the costs of social services and health care years ahead.”*

*“...that how with good nutrition therapy you can effect on individual factors and improve the quality of life, that we have a reported case whereby collaboration with health care and our food restored the normal quality of life of a customer...the forecast was that an amputation would have been needed in this case due to his weight and basic illnesses...”*

*“Or we have done the right thing in the first place, so it is in the long run more economical and feasible than if we do it afterwards. This afterwards correction of processes...this has not been considered in the traditional health care...it can be calculated in person working months.”*

The caterer emphasised the efficiency of their renewed catering processes in terms of national comparison, their use of latest professional IT-technology in designing menus and with their suppliers. The catering organization was among the first to be certified by the semi-official Steps to Organic – scheme, informing customers about the use of organic food. Unexpectedly, the menus became a kind of marketing ‘tool’ for the municipality, gaining publicity through private festive occasions, provincial mass events, and wider recognition by national health oriented professional associations.

The caterer had adopted a procurement strategy aimed at benefitting local and regional suppliers. In support of local livelihoods, traditionally bread and potatoes were sourced within the municipality. Additionally organic food such as local carrots and onions were purchased and they were found to be excellent in terms of their quality and better than conventional ones. The preference for organic food developed initially through the choice of quality products, and was later on used as a technical criteria in tender calls. The purchased ingredients included among others organic milk and sour milk, organic bread, organic onions and potatoes. The idea of branding the municipality was connected with serving organic food and to strengthen the public impression, fairly traded coffee and sugar were also procured.

*“I recently met a strategy leader of a city. And, if you see success as a whole, so you have to govern and link relevant matters piece by piece.”*

The caterer promoted a world view of sustainable development as sensible, economical and profitable processes [of a particular organization] not entailing waste and aligning with social and ethical principles. Environmental friendliness was coupled with organic food and farming and possibilities for expanding organic food sector, as well as ‘plant-based’ thinking. Furthermore, the caterer linked public catering and procurement with national food security, which again was linked with the food chain operations on the regional and national level. The ethical principle dictated that no problems were to be caused for others – such as farmers, transporters or caterers. The particular material savings were to be identified contextually, such as electricity and water.

*“How our money plays...The buyers’ ability to see...what this euro means after five years, the euro I’ve spent. In a way, that you don’t establish your position in exploiting others.”*

*“You have to see the supply chain, you have to have someone who farms, someone who processes and someone who transports. To govern this kind of whole.”*

The caterer reflected on his position and role within these developments and saw that the ‘case for quality was made’ as structures in operations and procurement were changed from immediate savings to strategic investments in rather progressive ways. The caterer mentioned his membership in the programme to promote Finnish Food Culture, in strategic planning committees for food security, and other more regional projects to develop food systems. However, the problems [in public health] were on such a level that the awareness of the quality of food seems to be spreading among top officials on the sector, and in this way improvement measures also become extensively disseminated. Thus the caterer successfully made use of the opportunity for change in terms of wider developmental ripple effects too; moreover, ‘at home’ the municipal manager supported the caterer as the forerunner of quality food. The caterer strongly stressed the outlining of the whole and finding the shared mission and goal in communication.

*“The initial situation was that I should have saved quite a lot and I said I cannot save anything...then we discussed about cost structures...one cannot, doesn’t need to, bargain on quality.”*

*“I’m basically a nutritionist by education, but I also am a teacher and trained in psycho-social crisis management. I see food as part of the management of everyday life.”*

*“I’ve had my hand in this of course...I have brought the view, in a way the quality view...I stay behind this matter. And I have taken the message to others, too.”*

#### Negative emotions and their attributions

As a backdrop for the professional proud the caterer expressed anger at ‘current state of affairs’ of Finnish catering, whereby the core aspects such as health, staff’s dignity, economic value of meal ingredients and future potential security of food system were all more or less neglected. While the price of food was the main focus of catering organizations across the country, these important matters were passed to the detriment of the sector and the food system at large.

*“If we are actors of low prices on the catering sector...if we don’t appreciate the workers and are not willing to pay for them...I visited a professional kitchen abroad and asked about their workers, so they had three cooks but the others, 15 of them, were not mentioned...human rights come to mind...how can an exploited person serve well the one supposed to use the service...do our world views even meet.”*

*“If we don’t believe in Finnish food on national level, so who is going to grow it?...no one is going to go into farming, because you don’t want to go on a sector where you know you will fail.”*

*Particularly he found that the quality of conventional food varies culturally; it is important to know whether food is Finnish, European or Asian. Furthermore, the caterer felt negatively about institutional aspects of global trade, because it allowed food items of very different quality to be exchanged on the market without respective qualifications pertaining to provenance.*

*“And, because cultures impact on ways people act. You can sin and then go to church to confess your sins. A good example of this is the Chinese milk scandal...when there is money in play, the money has no price. Its history... Well, Finnish conventional...it is trustworthy, it is plausible.”*

Furthermore, the caterer saw that basic research regarding catering is missing, and the nutritional basic knowledge is rather old; it may not be relevant in terms of the changed modern processes. Food marketing regarding new kinds of foods seems to be excessive even though there is not

enough understanding about the impacts of 'basic foods'. Therefore, more comparative nutritional research would be needed. Finally, the caterer stated that while there were discussions about using commercial contract catering, the municipality had made a decision to continue with 'own catering' in stead of calling for tenders. The professional, who had supported the success of the municipality by all means available for public catering, had a secure position – so far.

#### 4.2 'Lukewarm' caterers

##### Societal position and style of operations

The caterer worked in a large commercial catering organization, active and expanding on the domestic as well as international market. The company was part of a larger conglomerate, which offered some synergies in procurement but some local ingredients were used across different catering sites. The customers were employees, students and elderly persons in (private) nursing homes. The domestic lunch restaurant market was 'full' and shared by mutually competing players; more market share could only be taken from other companies. The catering organization identified business in school catering, a new competitive market which began to open to allow competition between commercial and the traditional public catering. The catering company was 'free' of public procurement directives. The procurement had been intensively developed during last ten years, and all the food items, carefully tested for their quality, were procured by contracts with audited businesses and the deliveries took place through wholesalers. The main focus of the company was to cater tasty, safe and nutritious food according to customer expectations. Furthermore, the company also developed its environmental activities through international schemes such as ISO 14 000 and Green Office, and run projects of its own. Plans for novel environmental measures and working ways including menus were underway in response to customer interest and environmental 'Zeitgeist'.

##### Positive emotions and their attributions

The caterer was professionally proud for working in an international catering organization, part of a large conglomerate, responsible for serving high quality tasty food customers from morning till evening under fierce competition. The company exerted a continuous attention to budget discipline and the margin. This was also used as incentive for employees. When developing their activities on several fronts, the company was ready to reorient itself if a combination of excessive costs for developmental efforts and low margins were in sight. The shedding of work force was mostly avoided by circulating personnel, but during downshifts that may not be adequate. The economic control of the company was developed in unique ways with the wholesaler as they had mutually transparent pricing on logistics. Furthermore, the company also had open books with the private customers and business practicalities were changed according to needs even overnight by negotiations.

*"I just heard we lost the tender for those schools to a public actor...this is fierce price competition...when we make a bid, so we have certain nutritional aspects, and we calculate the price accordingly, and we don't reduce the price that if someone does it cheaper, then we are not with the others. But our biggest business is staff restaurants."*

Customers were always the first focus of the company, and catering for their nutritional needs was important. However, it was to be matched with customer approval by following continuous developments on the food sector. 'Basic food' was an embodiment of the state of the art of cooking, as people wanted to enjoy everyday tasty food while having something special for festive



occasions. The company served fair, clear and basic nutritionally full meals, including food items such as pasta, meat balls, fish, porridges, berries and rye bread. Furthermore, particularly young people wanted to eat wheat bread and persuading them to eat rye bread took some time. At last, the high quality whole grain rye bread was identified as a delicates, which it really was.

*“When our product development creates new recipes I participate in testing the taste and otherwise try to brainwash our department all time a little that wholegrain and less salt and you do have the right fats and so on. I lecture about different nutrition topics to our customers. Then I educate our staff and work as help for restaurants.”*

The company only used contract products, carefully selected through tendering process, whereby main emphasis was on the taste, food safety and suitability for the process, uniform quality, availability and security of deliveries. The company followed an auditing scheme with their suppliers. In case there were eventually undeliverable products, a reserve plan was drawn. On the opposite side there were no more the nice guys as in the old days but professional evaluation of product features. Price was important in case there were rather similar options. When recognizing interesting ingredients abroad through their catering units, they introduced the products into Finnish market through ‘national taste’ considerations and possible modification. The logistics was rationalized through a wholesaler, which delivered to whole of Finland, with the exception of major dairy company with its own deliveries.

*“At us, when we choose ingredients, because we are a large organization, so it pays for us to invest in choosing and calling tenders for ingredients, we have contract products...then we test carefully by blind tests that the ones tasting the food won’t have connections with the company...”*

*“There is always the origin, we have that in those specs...country of origin and these, and they also have an effect by us. But that the selection process starts from seeing the sensory quality and after that the price is set on the table and then considered when it is necessary to pay, to take the more expensive product, if there is a big difference in the quality...For us it is very important and specified what kind of a minced meat beef we take because that’s the beef and the customer eats it...But if the products are about similar then we of course take the most economical one, that this is very much case by case...”*

Furthermore, food scandals and other concerns such as genetically modified food were to be handled in discreet manner, with reasonable alignment with the supply and demand.

*“In this business, we do in no way unethical choices knowingly. Then we are extremely sensitive about food scandals...so we very quickly change products...a bird flu, at that stage we quitted all the imported ducks and pheasants and those...necessarily they are not causes for real problems but customers’ image at that stage...it would have been stupid to offer in our occasions some rare French duck or goose...our loadstar is to cater our customers safe food.”*

*“GM food stirrup came and went...we decided on conglomerate level to stay away from that...I think it has been eased that if possible, we stay away...some cocoa bean...if there are no [unmodified] ones, I suppose they make chocolate from those...the soy oil for margarine is gm-free because it is still possible. Because you have to eat...to claim to stay away forever, so that is not very realistic then. It’s not sensible.”*

The media had made environmental issues such as climate change very clear, and the matter was known by the public at large. The company saw their customers were well-educated and concerned about environmental impacts; the response was a project to increase energy and

material efficiency of their restaurants. Possibly ingredients would be added later on as the company saw that the trend was unavoidable. The company had certified its activities by ISO 14 000 and Green Office certification was underway. The employees had workshops to develop their own work through work from home and coming to work by public transport. The employees felt committed to the environmental aspects and tried to follow the guidelines for saving. The work looked like an immense project.

*“To recycle and reuse, but I wouldn’t agree to wear a peat dress, so renewable and sustainable the sustainable development doesn’t need to be. But it’s modern, that there is all the time more and more pollution and the atmosphere is polluted and thinner and thinner, so if nothing is done, things turn out bad.”*

*“...and to change for energy efficient bulbs and the like...when you sit there in the evening as you make a longer day, so some one says that hey, I’m switching off all the lights so we don’t need to sell that many coffees, when one needs to keep up this house, and light are on for nothing.”*

*“We have to stay along this development of course. We have enlightened customers and we have to develop some sort of program for that, that this work goes on, but I don’t want to explain it in more detail.”*

Moreover, due to customers’ request, the company served organic food where it was sensibly implementable. Organic milk was served in a few Green Flag schools and the caterers supported children’s consumption of this milk by shaking it to mix the milk fat into the milk column. The caterers saw that in Finland the fields could be organic, without strong fertilizers and pesticides, but the price level should be reasonable. Increased consumption would induce scale of economy, about which the company tried to negotiate with a dairy company. However, institutional size packaging of milk was not agreed to and obviously a larger ordering list would be needed. The company suggested it could offer in the future meatless and vegetarian days.

#### Negative emotions and their attributions

The caterer felt the competition on the market was fierce, whereby one’s victory was another one’s loss. The caterer was concerned about and committed to the success on the market of the company, and regarded that it was the employees’ responsibility to act in such a way that the business could continue. During the year, the company informed the employees about the contracts it lost and made, whereby shedding of work force was a necessity at times. The recession was identified in the company by customers’ increased use of milk and fruits, part of the ordinary meal, but not consumed to the extent normally.

*“And it is quite heavy, that in some phase one has been discussing with the in-house nurse, that if one takes tasks home and thinks about work at home, so during these difficult times one takes even more work home and you think about them...what shall I say to this person.”*

Particularly on the school meal sector, a commercial caterer was not always warmly welcomed. After the public authorities had critically evaluated their catering, they had considered other options and opened the market for competition, whereby tenders were called. If a commercial caterer got the contract, they were often criticized for the quality of the meals. The caterer felt the authorities were responsible for the quality, but customers didn’t know the basis for their public officials’ decisions. They tried to develop public relations to communicate about the value of their service.

*“A big organization like us is seen as quite a monster. It’s quite a challenge.”*

*“We have organised these ‘learn about school meals’ evening for parents because it is thought that a commercial player comes to the school and the familiar and safe city catering is missing...and the commercial ones make money straight from the child’s lunch plate.”*

The nutritionist supervised the school menus and their ingredients, and saw a plethora of diets as cause of unnecessary work and thus a cause for lower operational efficiency. In this way, the children’s diets became restricted without good reason.

*“And then, when it is a fact that by school age a large part of the allergies disappears, so in spite of this they come to school with a long list of allergies...and we work for this. This is really crazy. This is my favourite topic, that how could this be made sensible...that we should understand that we narrow down the child’s diet for nothing...some sort of updating of allergies...to sort out diets.”*

The company organized organic weeks in its restaurants and previously had a worrying case of supplier of organic herbs, used as fresh for the meals, which were found to contain high numbers of microbes. Due to deficient food hygiene, the deliveries from the farm were immediately stopped. The company also made efforts to source organic meat; after having worked hard for the case, the prices became nearly double as expensive than the ‘ordinary’ ones and only a very limited number of restaurants could implement this organic menu. For a big company and national marketing campaign the result was a disappointment. From the nutritional point of view, organic food was seen to lack selenium in general and milk vitamin D fortification, which created critical relation to organic food in its entirety. Finally, customers’ claims about health quality of organic food did not seem to match with the scientifically based conception about composition and health impacts of organic food.

*“I have not noticed anything particular about organic food, that it would be tastier...as a nutritionist I have been very irritated that organic food has been marketed as much healthier than...I’ve read reports claiming that this is nonsense...that organic food would have more nutrients...I have critical relation to it...personally I have been irritated that customers make all these health claims without any evidence.”*

As a concept, local food seemed confused and as such not very applicable. Without a clear definition, use of ‘local food’ could not be recorded for interested media. Local food was understood to reflect the wider environment of living, which varied for different people.

*“If someone would please say what it is. The concept is so messy...they talk a lot about it [local food] but a definition would be nice.”*

*“I feel local food is Finnish food, it can be from Lapland, but if it’s Finnish, then it’s local. If it says China food, then it’s not any more...but for some of our people, who travel on continuous basis..., for him or her local food could be Scandinavian.”*

#### 4.3 Caterers under sustainability stress

##### Societal position and style of operations

The municipally owned catering company served a large municipal district of specialized hospitals, with more than ten central kitchens. The customers included patients with about 50 different special diets, staff, students and guests. The company was heavily administered by various stakeholders. The organization produced high quality healthy fresh meals which were not

industrially prepared, and the operative equipment was in careful maintenance. The organization's efficiency was monitored and developed continuously according to economic, productivity, and qualitative metrics. Furthermore, the organization was under continuous pressure to make cost savings while the share of food related costs was shrinking and other operative costs increasing.

#### Positive emotions and their attributions

The caterer experienced professional pride when stating that in Finland, they had very extensive and high quality food services on the sector of catering for special hospitals. The continuous follow up of the performance of the fresh food operations entailed a particular nutritional and food cultural value, managed in challenging circumstances. The nutrition interests were high on the agenda and the caterer worked in collaboration with university researchers. The caterer maintained that the impact of nutrition on human wellbeing was clearly scientifically evidenced and therefore, non-medical nutrition therapy had increasing emphasis in treatment of obesity, cholesterol, high fat content and blood pressure. Most importantly, food and nutrition have by nature a long-term impact on public health and the 'debt' would to be paid later on. However, one needs to know what good nutrition means and the plate models offer strong guidance for good food behaviour. Particularly impressive results such as the impact of whole grain, blueberry and fish on the risk markers of coronary diseases and diabetes increased the nutritional applications of these ingredients. Nutrition science was the recognized basis for developmental work in catering. The Baltic diet was seen as practice-oriented new approach offering a coherent response to nutritional developments, which seemed to be under continuous price pressures..

*"Well, if we just manage to work hard for good nutrition as part of non-medical treatment, so I believe that it cannot get worse. But it takes incredible persistence on our part that we stay strong on this sector and get the resources so that no one else is grabbing them and it requires tremendous sort of enormous grounding."*

The caterer of the municipally owned company dealt with and managed successfully the high expectations of exclusive customers on the hand, and on the other the 'ordinary' mainstream demands. The pride was grounded on matching the expectations of flawless catering operations at all times and conditions, independently of strikes on industrial sectors such as transport, industrial food withdrawals, local epidemics and pandemics, unavailability of ingredients, non-deliveries of contracted items and scarce availability of educated personnel. The overall operational security, characterised by extremely high hygienic standards, was very close to 100%. Furthermore, continuous maintenance, refurbishing and immediate fixes were implemented.

*"Here we have huge experience for the job we have lots of knowledge, both documented and tacit. Then, this organizational competence, the know-how of these processes and in a way model of action which is strong."*

*"We are demanded a really hard agility...a difficult diet patient may enter at any moment and the next meal must to be cooked according to this patient's needs."*

The procurement rules were the instrument used to make contracts with suppliers and purchase the food into the house. The tender calls included ranking the bids in terms of price, delivery quality and nutritional quality. Because of sometimes uncertain deliveries by and changes in selections of wholesalers the caterer had contracts with more than one wholesaler; balancing between the availability of different food items by different wholesalers was a tricky skill to be

mastered. The caterer was also happy to be able to procure mainly domestic vegetables and some other domestic products.

*“I’m really a strong user of domestic food...and domestic food is really top-of-the-range...for vegetables, the freshness and the length of the chain has a strong effect.”*

*For the caterer, environment and food were strongly connected. Green footprints seemed interesting, and carbon dioxide labelling on the packages was expected. The caterer saw that there would be great potential in saving energy and water. The caterer understood sustainable development as a challenge, embodied in sustainable services.*

*“I never assumed that everything should be extremely easy. For instance using durable dishes instead of paperware means more work, but no waste piles. This is an extensive entity in work practice.”*

#### Negative emotions and their attributions

The changing service expectations caused an increase in selection and difficulties in procuring, storing and serving food by the catering organization, which lived up to more long-term economic calculations and procedures. Furthermore, there was continuous pressure to lower the prices of food, whereas personnel costs, transports, rents, depreciation and financing as well as other services increased their share of total costs. The organization was against ‘industrial’ food, stored for several days and served in packages. As a typical example, the caterer evaluated packaged portions made of mixed nuggets and pasta without vegetables as low-level and chaotic against the backdrop of proper meals with plenty of vegetables served on a plate.

*“...in a way, food is only a percentage or one and a half percentage of total costs in special nursing, so there they want to make so heavy savings that it risks, in a way, that you lose the quality or the quality will be accepted as a continuously lower standard and then nobody commits to real, the final quality...this is very much as they say, this [public catering] is a sector where everybody is an expert as all of us eat...and when it is so ‘easy’ it is also easy to point to possibilities to save.”*

*“Food services on the spot is of no value for decision makers today...in this business, it is all about the cent. It’s terrible, but that’s how it is.”*

The globalization was seen to add complexity as the selection had grown huge and it was very tedious to collect the information regarding particular food items. The catering organization always made sensory and process evaluations of the products. They always wanted to know the country of origin and would have preferred domestic products which was, however, not possible according to procurement directive. They should be able to base their criteria on the concentrations of pesticides or some other product aspects in terms of chemical or other relevant analyses. Furthermore, domestic berries were nearly one third more expensive than imported ones, and the availability of valuable blueberries and raspberries was very low; the berries decayed unpicked.

*“The wholesalers have more and more detached from their products...their knowledge is very technical...they would, they should know more, but I understand that the selection is huge and if we want to know exactly [pesticides] so it is a challenge...if something changes in the products, do they remember to notice us according to contract in a way to rules of the game, there is an awful number of changes. And today the availability of products is a big problem...the contract says we purchase this and that and then, when you order, call [the product] home, so they’ve run out of it,*

*or temporarily out of it, or it's changed a little different or this world...it has developed into worse all the time."*

As the competition was heavy, the morale of trading partners also seemed to be on trial. This demanded increased readiness by the company in case of delivery problems. Furthermore, there were continuous changes in product composition and difficulties in availability. Additionally, big companies were able to perform significantly better 'on paper' than SME's but on the other hand, this was not evident in any way in the real product quality.

*"On the other hand, if you think, what kind of things have happened recently, that sometimes something Brazilian has been sold as Finnish and sometimes the [expiry] dates have been a bit modified and so on...the means of competition so they change, not all of them are necessarily quite clean."*

The environmental aspects were seen very extremely relevant and positive but so far, mixing rather insignificant and significant aspects in an amazing way. Environmental policies seemed to lack consistency while oil and transport prices rocketed and some parts of the world experienced increasingly dry periods. Organic food did not seem to profile itself through scientific discourse and the quality was uneven to consumers' dissatisfaction, but positive aspects such as limited industrial processing and taste expectations were there. Local food was understood as Finnish food, and demands for vicinity food were seen to be without productive geographic and regional basis.

*"Local food is Finnish food...if we don't take it that way we're on the wrong track. I can't see anything else."*

The caterer was very much in line with the socio-economic and ecological challenges of sustainable development. However, as nutrition science was a mature evidenced based guideline for catering industry, sustainable food system, including its various dimensions, did not seem like an applicable orientation in terms of various food items to be made use of in procurement and meal provision.

*"In this environment, with the medicos, you have no other alternative than to prove your actions through science...The significance of nutrition for maintaining human health has been shown indisputably."*

The domestic food system seemed to be in an alarming condition, and sadly in decline. Even rather strong agricultural areas seemed to serve as summer residents and 'leisure land'. Animal husbandry was driven down because it was not viable any more, and later on when the consumption of milk products increased, the rebalance did not reach the previous level of production; animal husbandry was not one of the most flexible livelihoods. Obviously the strategic decision making on political level did not meet the circumstances of the farm level. However, farmers are entitled to earn their living; the level of farmers' income and the newcomers' interest in the sector go together. It should be understood and accepted that quality food is not free on the market. In a similar fashion, services should be as cheap as possible and provision of freshly cooked meals was not important if there is another, cheaper way. Again, catering jobs may not be that attractive because the work is stressful, physically demanding and possibilities for promotion limited. However, schedules are good unlike on the restaurant sector.

*“...the share of primary producer needs to be on sensible level...one of my relatives works as teacher in a university of applied sciences...made careful calculations showing the income as euros per working hour...nobody need to be a propel head to see that there is no sense in this.”*

## 5 Discussion

The paper dealt with positive and negative emotions in terms of sustainable food systems by three different Finnish caterers, typical for their contextual emotions regarding sustainability. The caterers expressed clearly emotional grounding on their green connections. The caterers' accounts on emotions in terms of sustainability seem to be closely linked with aspects of respective positions, style of operations, location and size of these organizations. The first worked in the position of an executive of a small rural municipal catering organization, the second as a leading nutrition and selection expert in a transnational catering company and the third as an executive manager of a publicly owned catering company for several special hospitals. The emotions are characterized broadly as positive and negative ones, and specifically attributed to groundings given by caterers. Furthermore, particularly the notion of professional pride is made use of as an interpretation based on “work-social” context, position and responsibility, and the negative emotions were broadly understood as anger (Turner & Stets, 2005, 26-68) t particular phenomena in one's professional reality; however, these emotions could also be better specified as fear or sadness but that effort is beyond this paper. The analysis of caterers' emotional relation to sustainability is seen to be rather trustworthy in that they were free to express themselves without need for emotional displays (Rosenberg, 1979, in Turner & Stets, 2005, 47) for the interviewer, as no particular beneficial publicity was to be expected. In this paper the main interest is in the well-grounded interpretation of emotional wellbeing and the social force of these emotions to drive sustainable food system; thus the graphic and simplistic patterns are looked for.

The rural caterer felt professional pride due to the upgrading of public meal of a small rural municipality across the food chain, from farmers to customers (Morgan & Sonnino, 2008). This pride was particularly enhanced by strategic procurement of local, regional and organic food (McGinnis, 1999), which created esteem for the caterer in professional circles. Furthermore, the caterer represented an advocate for increased equity between the servant and the one to be served, and for environmental regard generically across food system (Morgan & Sonnino, 2008). The negative emotions were directed at the low level of public catering in general and its downgrading effects on domestic and regional food systems through global trade. Finally, the caterer felt negatively about the weak position of farmers and caterers, who were worthy of proper appreciation (Morgan & Sonnino, 2008; Stevenson, 2005).

The caterer is seen to have experienced emotional wellbeing in the devoted position vis-à-vis specific others in the food chain and generalized others on the agrifood sector. Thus sustainability orientation increased the emotional wellbeing of the caterer as a ‘local hero’ and as a professional ‘change agent’ in wider circles. However, this position of a “citizen-consumer” (Spaargaren, 1997) at the service of the municipality was challenged by political developments whereby commercial caterers could make a contract with the municipality; these threats could be experienced as decreasing emotional wellbeing.

The commercial caterer experienced professional pride due to the competitive, high-level performance in a large transnational organization. A strand of pride may be attributable to the professional sensitivity to customers' variable concerns ranging from pleasurable taste

experiences to food safety to environmental regard. Negative emotions were experienced due to lost tenders in fierce competition as well as unjustified claims by customers without proper background information. Negative emotions were also aroused by customers' claims for organic food without scientific basis, which was however, the core of systemic actions to improve nutrition and environmental measures. Organic food was seen as a disappointment, so far not in alignment with nutrition science and good business. However, this contradiction must be bent towards customers' views. Further sustainability issues such as local food were rather seen through technical definition than as an intention for food safety, security and at large, sustainability of domestic food system. Farmers were not very much 'present' whereas employer's responsibilities were felt as concern for keeping employees' jobs.

The caterer's emotional wellbeing in terms of sustainability emphasised heavily the "weak" economic viability of the company (Jacobs, 1999) rather than the "strong" overall sustainability of the supply chain. However, the 'Environment' was perceived as important but mainly through customers' views as the market discourse for sustainability (Mikkola & Risku-Norja, 2012). The sensitivity to customers' views caused juggling with their views, eventually seen as ungrounded, and compromised emotional wellbeing as irritation.

The hospital caterer felt professional pride due to high quality fresh meals managed under demanding conditions. The struggle for quality, with co-operation with university research, against downgrading pressures, elevated the emotional experience of being persistent and successful. The (inter)national professional audience agreed to the achieved high level offering the caterer gratification by independent evaluation. The negative emotions were caused by inability to give scientific basis for procurement criteria of domestic food, which was seen to represent safety, security and quality. The wholesalers lacking capacity, highly dynamic global market and cracking trading morale did not satisfy caterer's standards. The catering work was admitted to be hard and demanding, with no career development in sight. Furthermore, global threats such as climate change together with inconsistent and inefficient environmental policy were seen very negatively. Finally, the declining domestic farming, especially animal husbandry, and incompatible agricultural policies were source of negative emotions. Local food was considered an inappropriate notion, mismatching by scale with large scale procurement.

The caterer's emotional wellbeing was supported by well-grounded professional pride while the extensive sustainability orientation 'from farm to fork' as resistance towards systemic pressures and lack of relevant knowledge carried a continuous emotional load, tuned negatively. Sustainability orientation under these conditions may introduce less emotional wellbeing than no sustainability orientation.

Trajectories of the caterers' activities, driven by their emotions in terms of sustainability, seem to suggest three very different developmental paths. The example of the rural catering organization suggests locally and regionally oriented procurement policies suitable for small organizations. Furthermore, the caterer's extension for regional food here is probably due to structural limitations of the local, and similarly, large scale caterers suggest a corresponding structural extension of local food to be national by provenance. Organic food presents itself as a technically valid procurement category, but again the small volumes in some products favour the small scale operations. However, an industrial product line such as milk or grain would be feasible for larger organizations as well, if the current nutritional limitations would be accepted or solved through adaptive measures. So far, the example of small rural catering organization seems to suit for similar units, promoting local and regional food supply chains. The approach may be problematic



due to the municipal administrative developments, whereby small municipalities are merged and thus catering organizations of larger scale created. Furthermore, this example does not solve the problems of global trade as an issue of sustainable product quality, but maintains the superiority of domestic products for imported ones without particular evidence.

The commercial caterer was a player on the global market place and followed the tunes of economic viability and customers' orientations on the upmarket catering. However, when looking for expansion on the market, public meals became an interesting addition to this well performing service industry. As for the commercial caterer, the business 'floated' depending on customers' orientations (Jongen & Meulenberg, 1998), again depending on environmental and sustainability discourses (Mikkola & Risku-Norja, 2012) as major constructors of public opinion. Therefore, the grounding of the sustainability interest probably varied in different countries according to local market, and instead of a conviction for sustainability there was more room for discourses on the market. However, the scientific grounding in the procurement and environmental activities could offer interesting future modifications for operations, although the deep accord of 'local food' as food security and safety did not match to company's style of operations.

The hospital caterer identified several lines of action in procurement, which were currently beyond reach. The biochemical composition of products and environmental as well as societal impacts were currently opaque and offered no basis for calling tenders, which were mainly based on price. The effort of opening this 'black box' was highly desirable for the caterer, who persisted on such solutions as tools for procurement on the global market. This emotionally driven orientation, if solved, would possibly offer significant and wide ranging developmental support for public procurement and sustainability of agri-food sector at large (HM Government, 2010; Mikkola & al., 2010).

## 6 Concluding remarks

The meals of the three caterers, in alignment with national nutrition recommendations, and as tasty as possible, might be speculated to hardly differ from one another. However, the empirical social reality in terms of emotions, indicating current desirable sustainability measures and the ones to be looked for made a great difference between the caterers. In case of the public rural caterer, green connections could be followed as personal work goals and the rise into prominence on the professional field entailed professional pride. These emotions are suggested to support the orientation towards local and regional food supply chains, which did not, however, comply with the large scale public caterer. This caterer's sustainability orientation was under continuous stress, whereby the caterer worked for finding better solutions to deal with the demands of public procurement directives. Here clearly higher-order conceptual and empirical knowledge would be needed in order to construct satisfactory and goal oriented procurement criteria. This endeavour would be of importance as the situation is shared by a plethora of public organizations. The commercial caterer was sensitive to customers' sustainability expectations but this dependence is seen to serve sustainability efforts from the point of view of the follower, not the leader. The "emotional stamina" (Hochschild, 1983, in Turner & Stets, 2005, 39) exhibited by these actors during their struggles on the market and within public bureaucracies strongly evidences the force of emotions for sustainability.

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# **Sustainability Management in Agribusiness: Challenges, Concepts, Responsibilities and Performance**

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## **Abstract**

The idea of sustainable management has recently gained growing attention in the agribusiness sector. This is mainly due to a widespread discontent with the industrialization of agricultural production and food processing and growing public pressure on agribusiness firms to implement more sustainable management practices. In this paper we present the results of an explorative empirical study of sustainability management in German agribusiness firms. The study shows that agribusiness firms have developed a broad understanding of sustainability management and perceive a multi-faceted spectrum of societal demands they have to meet. The most important arguments for implementing more sustainable management practices are that companies have to make sure that they are trusted by society in the long run and that the perception of a company by external stakeholders has become more and more important. The companies surveyed know quite a number of sustainability programmes and standards, but the number of companies that actually participate in these initiatives is much smaller. Nonetheless, the majority of the respondents feels that their company is more successful with regard to sustainability management than industry average.

**Keywords:** *Corporate social responsibility; external stakeholders; performance; sustainability*

## **1 Introduction**

Companies in the agribusiness sector are increasingly exposed to the public eye (JANSEN and VELLEMA 2004) and face growing pressure to move towards more sustainable management practices. This is mainly because the agribusiness sector is located at the crossroads of various societal conflicts. Some of the conflicts between agribusiness and society have a long tradition and often stem from disparities between consumers' (or other stakeholders') expectations and modern farm practices (BRUHN 2003). Intensive livestock production, for instance, is criticized for its high emissions, contributions to nutrients oversupply in areas with high livestock densities, long-distance animal transports, and low animal welfare standards. Conventional high-input arable farming is blamed for causing erosion, loss of biodiversity, pesticide residues, and nitrate emissions. Furthermore, monocultures and the high energy input of modern agriculture are criticized (JANSEN and VELLEMA: 2004).

Other conflict areas have popped up in more recent times. Meat consumption and, thus, livestock production are perceived as major contributors to global climate change (EEA 2006). Furthermore, against the background of widespread famine in developing countries, activists regard the massive use of soy beans for livestock production in industrialized countries as unethical and a contribution to "virtual land grabbing" (STEINFELD et al. 1997). Soy bean production is also a major driver of the growing prevalence of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in world agriculture (ISAAA 2011). Due to a widespread opposition against GMOs mainly in continental Europe (GRUNERT, BREDAHL and SCHOLDERER 2003), this

development is observed with increasing ethical condemnation. Bioenergy is a comparatively new production sector but has already lost much of its green and environmentally friendly image. Oil palm farming in Malaysia and sugar cane production in Southern America, for instance, are blamed for being eco-unfriendly due to land use changes including the cutting down of rainforest (CASSON 1999). Furthermore, the “food or fuel” debate is propelled by food price spikes on increasingly volatile agricultural markets which is considered to be mainly the outcome of growing bioenergy production in industrialized countries (TANGERMANN 2011). This non-exhaustive list could easily be complemented by references to other conflicts over, for instance, the major outlines of the Common Agricultural Policy in the European Union or food safety issues (JANSEN and VELLEMA 2004).

Not only the agricultural sector but also upstream and downstream industries in the agribusiness sector face societal conflicts. Life science industries, for instance, are criticized for their biotechnology programmes contributing to the proliferation of GMOs and other controversially discussed practices such as cloning. Plant protection and fertilizer companies are being charged for systematically contaminating the environment (JANSEN and VELLEMA 2004). The food and beverage industries are blamed for deceiving consumers and promoting the consumption of too much fat, sugar, salt and alcohol and, thus, contributing to various health problems of modern societies such as obesity, coronary diseases, diabetes and alcohol abuse (SIMON 2006). Unfair trading practices at the expense of small-scale farmers in developing countries have provoked public debates (BACON et al. 2008). In work intensive industries such as the meat industry, even in industrialized countries such as Germany working conditions are often poor and various meat scandals have contributed to a bad industry image and a loss of consumer trust in food quality and safety (SPILLER et al. 2005).

The perception of the wider public is not only increasingly critical and risk-conscious (HADDOCK 2005); the influence capacity of stakeholders is rapidly growing (GERLACH 2006) and protests, for instance against new investments into livestock production or bioenergy plants, have developed to an ever more professional level (BECKER and OPPERMAN 1994). Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as Greenpeace or World Wildlife Fund have accumulated much social capital and, thus, are trusted by most consumers to a much larger extent than industry representatives or scientists and use their good relations with the mass media for promoting their ideas and organizing protests against industry action (JÄCKEL and SPILLER 2006).

It can be summarized that there is a “general discontent with the industrialization of agricultural production and food provision systems has put agribusiness and the food industry at the core of societal debates” (JANSEN and VELLEMA 2004: 4). This development has put pressure on the agribusiness sector in general and individual companies to avoid controversially discussed management practices and improve the sustainability of products and processes. In this sense it has repeatedly been argued that agribusiness firms must implement changes in the way they do their business to maintain their “license to operate” and their “license to deliver” to the ever more demanding markets in the post-modern societies of industrialized countries (VELDKAMP et al. 2008; HEYDER and THEUVSEN 2008).

Only very little research has been done so far on how agribusiness firms perceive external pressures for more sustainability and how they react to external stakeholders’ (consumers’, customers’, nongovernmental organizations’ etc.) demand for more sustainable management practices. Existing literature tends to focus on specific aspects, for instance

animal welfare (DEIMEL et al. 2010) or media coverage of societal conflicts around agribusiness (FEINDT and KLEINSCHMIT 2011; BÖHM, KAYSER and SPILLER 2011). Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of sustainability management in agribusiness firms is still missing.

Against this background it is the objective of this paper to highlight how agribusiness firms perceive external pressures concerning their sustainability, how they react to these pressures and how they have defined internal responsibilities for sustainability management. Furthermore, the paper sheds some light on the success and performance effects of sustainability management. In section 2 we introduce some basics about sustainability management, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the CSR-performance relationship. Section 3 presents materials and methods and section 4 selected findings. In the final section we draw some conclusions and highlight future research directions.

## **2 Sustainability, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Performance**

The concept of sustainability has recently gained growing attention in the agribusiness sector (FRITZ and SCHIEFER 2008). „People, planet, and profit“ – this is the widely known trilogy of sustainability. It has been derived from the popular notion of sustainability as defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development: „Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs“ (BRUNDTLAND REPORT 1987). In 1992, the UN Conference on Environment and Development declared sustainable development as a global vision. The delegates identified economic efficiency, social justice and the protection of natural resources as basic and equally important principles. Therefore, economic, social and ecological sustainability are considered cornerstones of management practices which do not only aim at increasing profits and serving firm owners but take into account a broader range of stakeholder interests and societal issues (CRANE and MATTEN 2004).

In a management context, sustainability is often referred to through a corporate social responsibility (CSR) approach. This concept has gained a prominent position in the general management literature (DE BAKKER, GROENEWEGEN and DEN HOND: 2005) despite some uncertainties about its exact definition and content (CARROLL 1999) and the prevalence of similar and in some cases overlapping concepts such as corporate citizenship, accountability or good corporate governance (HISS 2006). A multi-stakeholder dialogue conducted by the European Union has provided some clarification. It was concluded that CSR can be defined as a concept that on a voluntary basis integrates social and environmental demands into business operations and the relationships with firm stakeholders (EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2001). In a very similar way, the World Business Council on Sustainable Development defines CSR as a concept that embraces “the integration of social and environmental values within a company’s core business operations and to the engagement with stakeholders to improve the well-being of society” (WBCSD 2002). CSR, thus, means the responsibility of enterprises for the effects of their business operations on the environment, their employees and the wider society.

Based on this conceptual understanding of CSR, CARROLL (1998) distinguishes between a firm’s economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibility. An enterprise acts economically responsible, if it is offering socially desirable goods and services at fair prices.

Through selling these goods and services, the enterprise secures employment and contributes to the wealth of society. Legal responsibility requires companies to act in compliance with laws. Ethical responsibility includes compliance with rules and values of a society even if they are not legally codified. Philanthropic responsibility stands for philanthropic actions of enterprises, for instance charitable giving or donation of voluntary labor. HEYDER (2010) sees these four aspects of a firm's responsibility based on the fundament of the triple bottom line of sustainability which reflects a company's economical, ecological and social performance (figure 1). CSR, thus, is a concept seeking to balance the economical, ecological, and social performance of an enterprise (LOEW et al. 2004; ELKINGTON 1994).



**Figure 1.** Firm responsibilities and the triple bottom line of sustainability (HEYDER 2010)

It has often been discussed in how far CSR activities and more sustainable management practices could have an influence on financial firm performance. Proponents of the neo-classical view of the firm, on one hand, are skeptical about this. They perceive the provision of employment and taxes and the maximization of shareholder value as the only social responsibilities companies have (FRIEDMAN 1970). On the other hand, behavioural theorists argue that it is in the enlightened self-interest of firms to undertake various forms of CSR. The benefits of taking a broader perspective that also includes ecological and social goals encompass enhanced reputation, stronger employee loyalty and legitimacy for firm operations granted by the wider public, governments, employees and other stakeholders (MOIR 2001: 17). Similar arguments can be deduced from the resource dependence perspective in organization theory and the stakeholder approach. Resource dependence theory argues that companies depend on critical resources owned by external parties, for instance suppliers, customers, or regulators, and that it is crucial to manage the dependencies stemming from these relationships (PFEFFER and SALANCIK 1978). Improving business relations with critical third parties, for instance regulators or a powerful nongovernmental organizations, can require the implementation of more sustainable management practices. Stakeholder theory argues in a similar vein (FREEMAN 1984). Depending on a stakeholder's potential for cooperation and threat potential (SAVAGE et al. 1991), it can be in the best interest of a company to improve the sustainability of its management practices and implement a more advanced CSR concept if this stakeholder expects a company to do this.

Another theoretical strand takes a moral approach stressing social expectations. In this context a moral obligation is called for because companies are owners of resources and skills and, therefore, should participate in solving social problems. In particular, the reference to social legitimacy is noteworthy. MOIR (2001: 17) argues that there is “some form of social contract”. This perspective implies that there are social expectations that a legitimate business would conduct in a specific manner. A similar idea prevails in the neo-institutional approach in organization science. It assumes that companies are subject to economic as well as social expectations. It is hypothesized that meeting social expectations is essential for gaining legitimacy and the ongoing support by influential groups (MEYER and ROWAN 1977). This is the more important the more critically observed an industry is and the higher the expectations concerning firm behavior are.

A multitude of empirical studies have tried to empirically investigate the performance effects of CSR. Some of these studies show that companies pursuing CSR strategies are more successful than others (ORLITZKY et al. 2003; MACKAY et al. 2007; CRAMER 2002). In line with the theoretical arguments outlined above, it can be assumed that the better performance of enterprises that are regarded as acting responsibly is due to better reputation, higher customer loyalty or higher legitimacy. Nonetheless, there are also studies that do not find a positive performance effect of CSR (MCWILLIAMS and SIEGEL 2000) but only positive effects on company reputation (HEYDER 2010). Due to additional costs of CSR, some authors even expect lower performance in firms behaving more sustainably. Finally it has also been argued that CSR is linked to past performance since only financially successful companies can afford CSR strategies (MCGUIRE, SUNDGREN and SCHNEEWEIS 1988). But high financial performance may also hamper CSR. BARNETT (2007: 808), for instance, argues that CSR activities by firms with a very good corporate financial performance (CFP) could eventually be recognized critically because “excessive CFP indicates that a firm is extracting more from society than it is returning and can suggest that profits have risen because the firm has exploited some of its stakeholders in order to favor shareholders and upper management.” It can be summarized that the relationship between CSR and financial performance is complex and, thus, clear cause-effect relationships are difficult to examine.

### **3 Material and Methods**

In order to answer the research questions outlined above, a comprehensive explorative empirical study of sustainability management in German agribusiness firms was conducted in collaboration with the University of Giessen and the Institute for Sustainable Management (ifnm), Bonn. Between March and August 2011, 142 firms from various agribusiness subsectors were surveyed through an online questionnaire. The study focused on perceived external pressure to improve the sustainability of products and processes, the development status of the firms' sustainability management, the CSR measures implemented in the companies surveyed, and the success of sustainability management. Data analysis has started with univariate analyses with SPSS; additional bivariate and multivariate analyses will follow in the next phase.

As most of the respondents (79.6 %) are responsible for sustainability in their company, a good quality of the answered questionnaires could be expected. The dominating industry sectors in our survey are retailers (14.2 %), slaughtering and meat processing (13.5 %),



bakery products (10.3 %), fruit and vegetable processing (9.7 %), confectionary processing (9.0 %) and beverage processing (7.1 %). The missing 36.2 % belong to eight other subsectors, such as fishery products or milk processing. In reference to company size, the answers are widespread. We find 33.9 % small companies with an average business turnover below 10 mill. €; 32.2 % generate a turnover between 10 and 100 mill. €, and 33.9 % have an annual turnover of more than 100 mill. €. Regarding their internationalization strategies, most of the companies surveyed do business in Germany, Western Europe, and Eastern Europe including Russia.

## 4 Results

### Challenges

Sustainability embraces ecological, economic and social aspects. This widely accepted view is – despite a slightly higher emphasis on ecological aspects – also shared by the companies in our survey (figure 2). The answers reflect a balanced understanding of sustainability management which has overcome the narrow-minded view in microeconomics that the maximization of shareholder value is the ultimate company goal (FRIEDMAN 1970; RAPPAPORT 1986). Instead it is much more in line with approaches which propose that companies usually have (or should have) a broad goal spectrum including, but not restricted to, financial performance goals (HENRI 2004; KAPLAN and NORTON 1996). A clear majority also agrees that sustainability management is something beyond minimum legal requirements. This perception is in line with many definitions of sustainability management and CSR (for instance, EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2001).

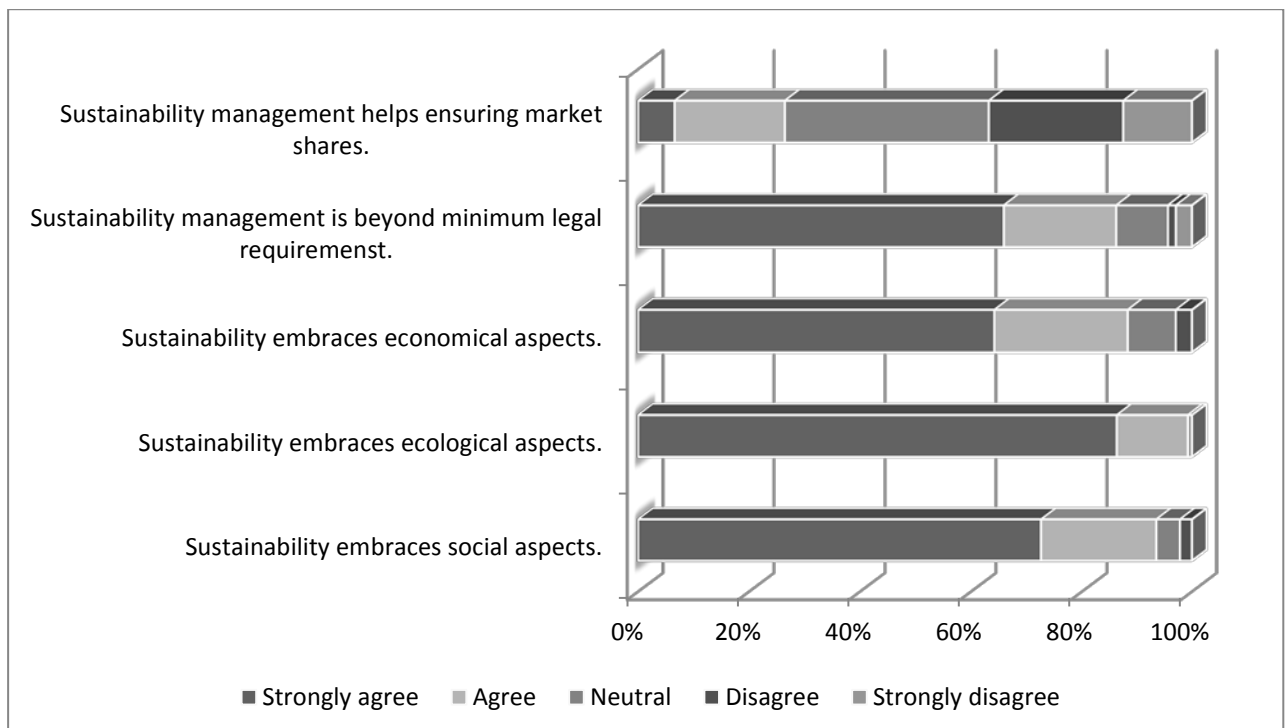


Figure 2. Aspects of sustainability management

In line with their broad understanding of sustainability, the companies surveyed perceive a multi-faceted spectrum of societal demands they have to meet. It includes such diverse aspects as sustainable agriculture, labor conditions, consumer information and human rights

(figure 3). The only topic that receives only moderate agreement is fair trade since this only affects traders and processors of tropical products such as cocoa or coffee (RAYNOLDS, MURRAY and WILKINSON 2007).

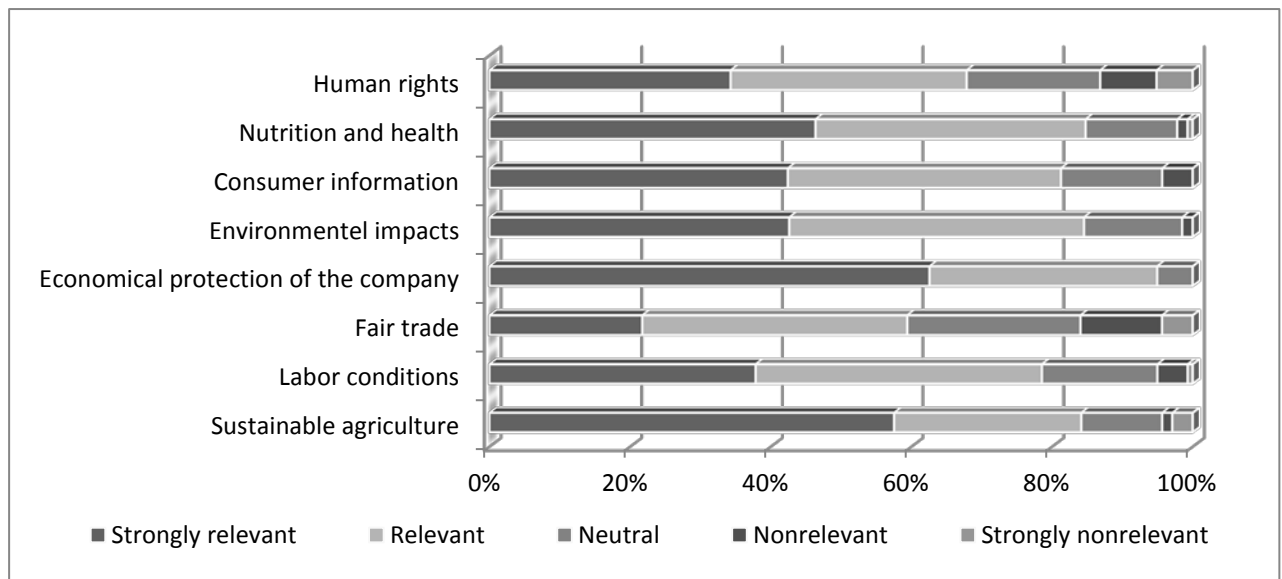


Figure 3. Societal demands faced by agribusiness firms

According to the neo-institutional approach, companies are subject to external pressures from their economic and institutional environments (MEYER and ROWAN 1977). In a similar vein, stakeholder and behavioural theories point to the multitude of stakeholders companies have and which can – to various degrees – influence management practices (FREEMAN 1984; SAVAGE et al. 1991). This situation is also reflected in the companies’ answers to the question whom they consider to be their central addressees of sustainability management. Figure 4 reveals that the respondents perceive the need to meet the demands of various stakeholders. Employees, consumers, and future generations are most frequently mentioned. Interestingly, nongovernmental organizations are not major addressees of corporate CSR activities although these organizations are often described as „social change agents“ (SIMSA 2001) which have the power to strongly influence the management practices of companies through challenging their legitimacy.

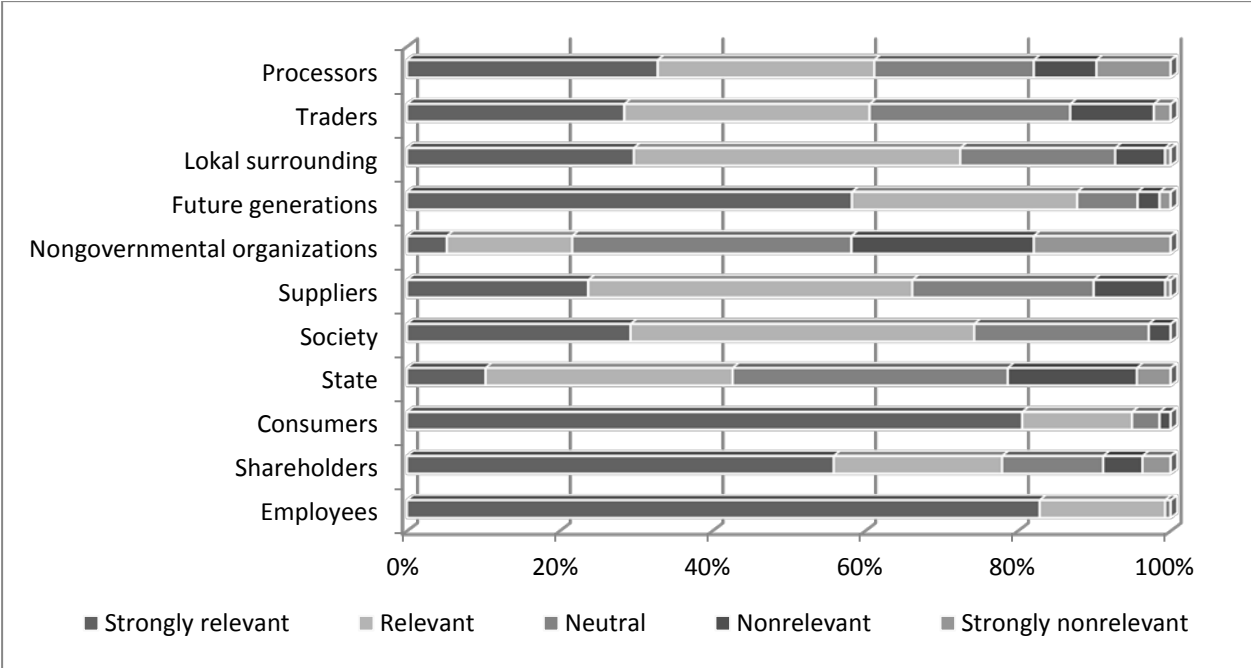


Figure 4. Addressees of sustainability management

The respondents mention various reasons why agribusiness firms tackle the issue of sustainability (figure 5). The two central arguments are that companies have to make sure that they are trusted by society in the long run and that the perception of a company by external stakeholders has become more and more important. Both arguments reflect the pressures from institutional environments which the companies surveyed have to meet if they want to secure their “license to operate” and “license to deliver” (Hiss 2006). The perceived demand to meet the requirements of important customers, for instance large retailers, to improve sustainability can be interpreted in a similar way.

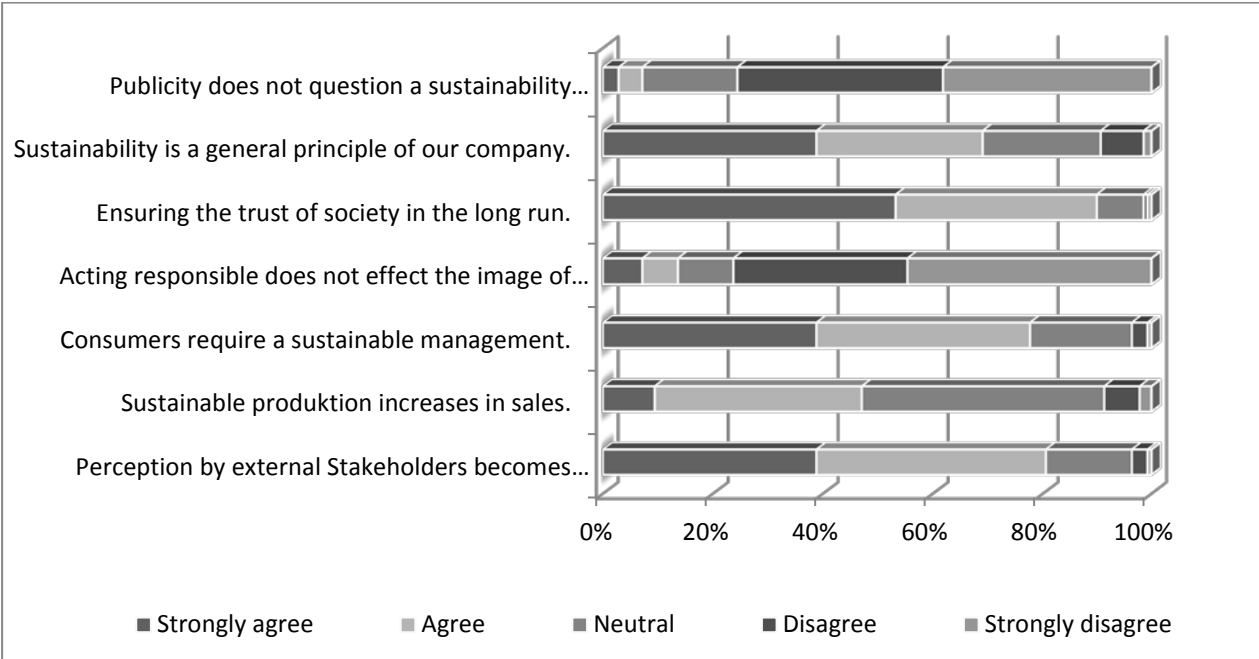


Figure 5. Reasons for improved sustainability management

All in all it becomes clear that agribusiness firms face various challenges from manifold internal and external stakeholders. This raises the questions which concepts they apply to meet these challenges.

**Concepts**

Sustainability and CSR are new topics on the management agenda of agribusiness firms. 11.3 % of the respondents say they have not implemented any form of sustainability management as yet. Only 38.7 % of the firms surveyed have implemented sustainability management at least five years ago; 50 % did so within the last five years. Not surprisingly, only 68.3 % of the companies surveyed allocate budgets for sustainability management. The infant status of corporate sustainability management is also reflected in the development status of planning activities. The survey reveals that only 63 companies have already defined sustainability criteria and collect relevant information. A small minority of 29 companies grade their sustainability management systems as “advanced”. 11 companies have implemented a benchmarking process in order to compare their own sustainability management with other companies.

Due to the various facets of sustainability, the companies surveyed have implemented diverse measures to improve their sustainability. Resource-efficient production, reduction and recycling of waste materials, and the abatement of greenhouse gas emissions are mentioned most frequently (figure 6). These measures have in common that they are characterized by complementarity between ecological and economic goals. More demanding sustainability concepts that could raise costs get less affirmation.

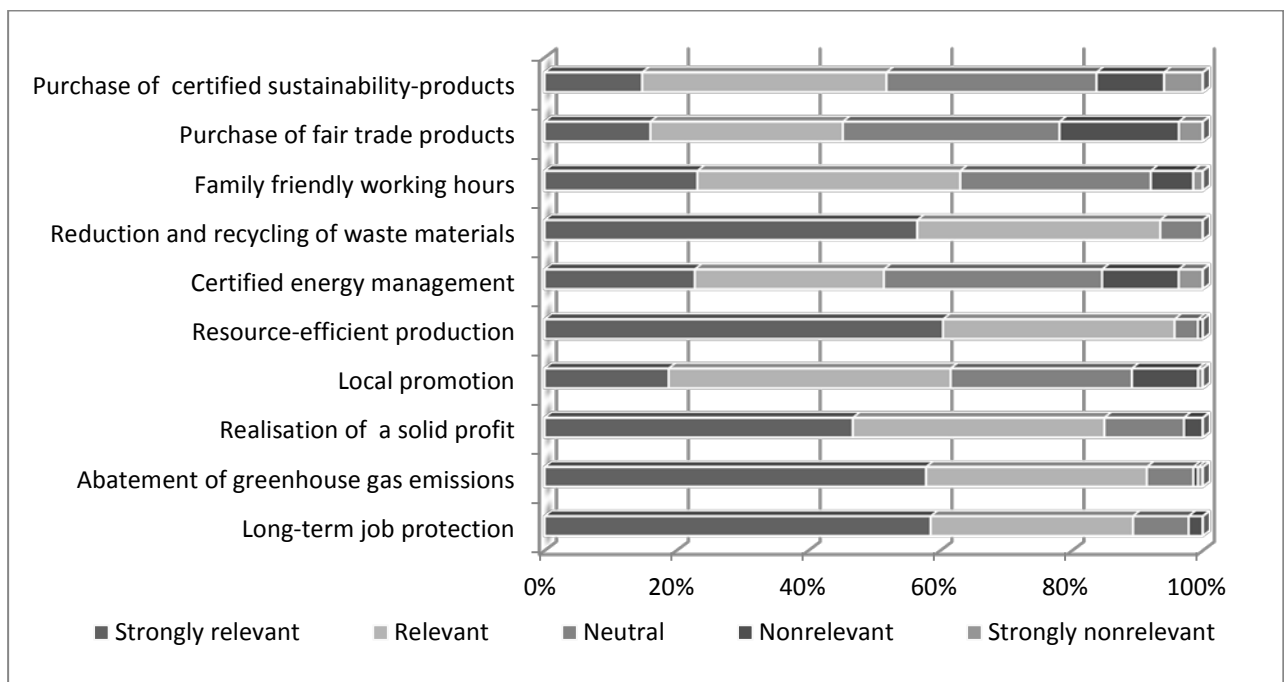


Figure 6. Sustainability management measures

In the agribusiness sector certification systems have gained considerable importance over the last decade (HATANAKA, BAIN and BUSCH 2005; GAWRON and THEUVSEN 2009). Some of these systems aim at improving food safety, whereas the majority differentiates agricultural and food products by highlighting organic production, fair trade, higher animal welfare

standards, regional production or other process characteristics (THEUVSEN and SPILLER 2007). Certification systems are also widely prevalent in sustainability management where they guarantee certain ecological or social standards. Many of these certification systems use labels to help companies to communicate their efforts to the wider public or other stakeholders. Other systems refrain from granting labels but assist companies in analyzing the sustainability of their products and processes (for instance, calculation of greenhouse gas emissions) or reducing or compensating negative ecological effects of company activities through, for instance, the buyout of carbon credits (THEUVSEN 2011).

The companies surveyed know quite a number of sustainability programmes and standards. Fair Trade (124 respondents), ISO 14000/EMAS (85), Rainforest Alliance (83), Marine Stewardship Council (77), Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (65), the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises (59), ISO 26000 (53), Carbon Reduction Label (48) and the Business Social Compliance Initiative (42) are mentioned most frequently. The number of companies that already actively participate in one of these initiatives or have acquired a label is much smaller. ISO 14000/EMAS (31 respondents), Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (21), the Social Compliance Initiative (14), the ILO Convention (14), Fair Trade (14), the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises (13), Marine Stewardship Council (12), ISO 26000 (11) and the Global Reporting Initiative are mentioned by at least ten companies.

Since external pressures from various stakeholders are major drivers of improved sustainability in the agribusiness sector, communication with these stakeholders is paramount. Communication through the internet is perceived as most appropriate. Printed environmental and social reports, once cornerstones of sustainability communication in many companies, are graded rather inappropriate (figure 7). These assessments reflect a general trend not only in the agribusiness sector to more heavily rely on electronic communication (HETTLER 2010).

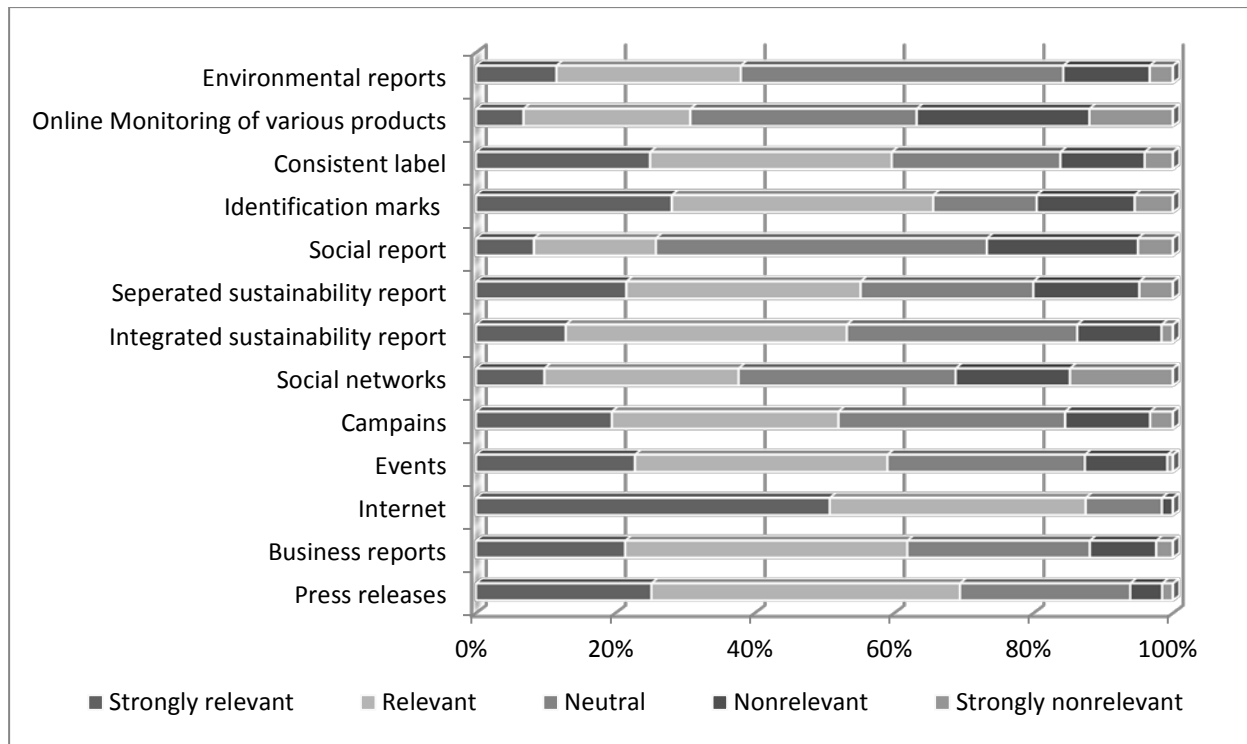


Figure 7. Appropriateness of various media for sustainability communication