# Looking for Meaning in a Policy World of Incoherencies

*An Ethnographic Analysis of Policy Actors'
Navigation of Paradoxes in Norwegian Food and
Development Policy*

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# Abstract

This thesis argues that inattention to policy actors' meaning, fear of meaninglessness, individual interests and agendas can contribute to incomplete policy analysis and misguide our understanding of the dynamics and outcomes of policy processes. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Oslo, the study addresses how policymakers involved in food, seed security, and other development policies navigate policymaking in a landscape of paradoxes and find 'meaning' in their work. The main argument is developed by analysing an approach known as "Policy Coherence for Development (PCD)", regarded as a premise necessary for achieving the sustainable development goals in an integrated manner at all stages of domestic and international policymaking. I examine how actors navigate conflicts within and between political spheres and the effect of power relations and meaning on this work for coherence.

By exploring the complexity of the roles of civil society actors, bureaucrats, and researchers and how they are constrained and liberated in their strive for meaning in a policy world of incoherencies, the study offers insights into how policy coherence attempts play out in practice. I build my argument around specific cases such as the 'food systems' approach, entailing cross-sectoral cooperation for sustainable food production, seed security policy and paradoxes between Norwegian policy on farmers' rights and Norway's demands on developing countries through free trade agreements.

Through these cases, I shed light on how PCD has led to the development of initiatives that support the Norwegian "good state" branding in international contexts and make policy coherence initiatives seem meaningful for civil society actors to engage with, given their political attention. However, I argue that many of these initiatives tend to be fetishised by politicians and bureaucrats, allowing the government to uphold an image of giving political attention and resources to cross-sectoral coordination at the expense of implementing the policies. On the other hand, the study shows that addressing policy incoherence and paradoxes appears meaningless for other policy actors. These actors work to cover up internal tensions and portray their political sphere as harmonious, competing with other political spheres for resources and attention. They do not actively address paradoxes and incoherence between sectors because they face obstacles rooted in how neoliberal approaches redirect resources and attention away from environmental and social concerns toward economic ones. These analyses further illustrate that work for policy coherence does not happen in a vacuum but in a complex landscape of power inequalities between policy sectors.

# Acknowledgements

Ida Morén Strømsø
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# Abbreviations

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| **APBREBES** | Association for Plant Breeding for the Benefit of Society |
| **EFTA** | The European Free Trade Association |
| **FAO** | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations |
| **IPR** | Intellectual property rights |
| **MFA** | The Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs |
| **NGO** | Non-governmental organization |
| **NORAD** | Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation |
| **NSD** | Norwegian Centre for Research Data (*Norwegian:* Norsk senter for forskningsdata) |
| **ODA** | Official Development Assistance |
| **OECD** | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| **PCD** | Policy Coherence for Development |
| **SDGs** | The Sustainable Development Goals |
| **UN** | The United Nations |
| **UNFSS** | The United Nations Food Systems Summit 2021 |
| **UPOV** | International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants |

# Chapter 1: Introduction

"Making the world seem stable when it is in fact in constant flux means that wielding power involves the ability to freeze meaning"

(Neumann, 2012, p. 80)

In 2018, I held a seat in the Norwegian governmental *Forum for Policy Coherence for Development* as a representative for youth organisations. I commenced this work with the motivation to learn how different constituencies could work together to ensure that Norway did not give with one hand and take with the other. However, my experience taught me how immensely complex and messy it is a task to unite different policy cultures, policy objectives and actors with personal interests to all move in the same coherent direction. Three years later, I watched the video of the official Norwegian statement to the Pre-Summit in July 2021 for the first United Nations Summit on Food Systems. No less than four Norwegian ministers were giving a speech, addressing the importance of collaborating, obtaining synergies and ensuring holistic approaches. The Norwegian Minister of Agriculture and Food, Olaug Bollestad, initiated the video and said there is "broad agreement for a holistic approach to the food system across sectors and different stakeholders. Norway has a tradition for cross-sectoral cooperation."[1]. Dwelling upon my own experiences of chaos and lacking policy coherence, I wondered, "what does this tradition for cross-sectorial cooperation entail"?

I started this research project as a former activist wishing to deconstruct policy coherence initiatives to understand why they do not work and how to improve them. However, the project became a study where I became increasingly curious about 'meaning'. Exploring attempts to obtain policy coherence and navigation of paradoxes, my fieldwork has shown how policy actors find themselves in power struggles, lack of resources, and random and surprising turns that can render their situations meaningless. They meet these situations in multiple ways to create meaning again. In line with the quote by Neumann (2012) above, I learnt through fieldwork that policy worlds are filled with instability and incoherencies. However, as he calls attention to, depictions of stability, agreement and objectivity can be used by those in power to "freeze meaning" or make policies appear meaningful systems to engage in.

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[1] The video is available at https://www.unfoodsystems.org/statements.php

For two decades, policy actors, particularly within development assistance, have attempted to obtain 'coherence' between political sectors preventing other sectors from hindering development objectives under the agenda 'Policy Coherence for Development (PCD) (Sianes, 2017; Stave et al., 2018). PCD is an agenda addressing political paradoxes hindering development objectives. It is one of the many responses to doubts about whether official development assistance (ODA) can engender poverty reduction and support development in developing countries (Sianes, 2017). It is also an agenda adopted by actors from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who wish to address and challenge the Norwegian double standard. With double standard, I refer to several paradoxes and tensions inherent in Norwegian foreign policy, as addressed by several scholars (see Bjørkdahl, 2021; Browning, 2021; Leira et al., 2007). These tensions often stem from Norway's "nation branding" as an altruistic state and leader in sustainability efforts, as demonstrated in the Norwegian statement to the Pre-Summit for Food, and national interests colliding with these images. However, as I have learned from my fieldwork, the tensions also stem from different people and sectors carrying diverging interests that do not align.

A prominent example of policy incoherence is the paradoxes surrounding Norway's REDD+ program (see Nilsen, 2010 for a review). Norway gives millions to rainforest protection whilst intensifying rainforest deforestation through trade agreements (ATTAC Norway, 2020; Førsund et al., 2021). Norwegian soy import for livestock feed also leads to deforestation (Spire, 2015). In recent years, new attempts at policy coherence also increased in the sector of food policies, aiming to unite the food-relevant political sectors for a 'food systems' approach (Brouwer et al., 2020; FAO, 2018; The Norwegian Government, 2019). I will examine paradoxes between food-relevant sectors by looking at policy actors navigating incoherence in their everyday work. By looking at the policy actors' meaning-making processes, I hope to understand how attempts at policy coordination play out in practice.

This thesis explores attempts to obtain policy coherence and displays policymaking's messy and complex features. It aims to understand how policy actors make meaning out of their work in a landscape filled with paradoxes. Wedel (2005, p. 35) states that "foreign aid policies cannot be more successful than their implementation, which inherently involves people and institutions. But people have their own interests and cultural frameworks, and institutions are inevitably grounded in culture and politics." Through ethnographic fieldwork in Oslo, I have explored two categories of policy actors working with food security and development to discover these interests and cultural frameworks, which frame their meaning-making processes. First, I have

looked at actors striving to attain policy coherence and second, actors reacting to existing incoherencies emerging between political sectors which affect their work.

The project explores several ways in which the actors find meaning. It looks at the complexity of bureaucrats' roles (Heyman, 2004). They show pride and disappointment regarding projects they have worked on for a long time. Still, when they throw them away after governmental shifts, some say that "it is the way things are", accepting their role. NGO staff show frustration towards poorly developed policies and lacking implementation. However, when politicians develop new similar policies, they again express hope and enthusiasm. A group of actors from different constituencies working for seed security have interests and opinions which go in all directions. Nevertheless, they frequently proclaim they are all in agreement.

Shore and Wright (2011) claim that policies create 'webs of meaning'. I argue that the cases under study in this thesis demonstrate how policy actors use depictions of harmony, resistance, and indifference to create meaning in their work in a sometimes-meaningless world of policymaking. I wish to tease out their meaning-making processes by examining policy actors' disagreements and agreements, tensions, agency, and resistance. The study also addresses how power relations, lacking resources and neoliberal structures can render it meaningless for the policy actors to challenge policy incoherencies threatening their own work.

Shore and Wright (2011) argue that political sciences and popular debate repeatedly depict policymaking as rational developments and policy documents as 'objective entities'. However, this thesis illustrates that policy processes are not solely top-down practices. They can take shape around grassroots level ideas, build on friendships and power struggles, and take random and surprising turns. Anthropologists hold unique tools to grasp policy and the meanings held by policymakers. By searching for these meanings, anthropologists question 'established truths' served in other policy studies and unveil cultural rationalities framing policymaking (Shore & Wright, 2011). Therefore, this project builds on perspectives from the emerging field of anthropology of policy, particularly contributions from Shore and Wright (2011). The project also contributes to the scarce anthropological literature on elites (Salverda & Abbink, 2012; Schijf, 2012; Shore & Wright, 2011). Salverda and Abbink (2012, p. 8) argue that anthropology primarily focuses on the marginalised populations; however, "understanding the position of the latter is enhanced by better insights in the actions and choices of elites".

Studying policymakers, both state and non-state actors, I have attempted to "select small sites that open windows onto larger processes of political transformation" (Shore & Wright, 2011,

p. 12). I have dived into the sphere of food systems, a relatively new approach to food security entailing holistic and cross-sectoral methods for addressing issues in food policy (Brouwer et al., 2020). The approach engendered new attempts at PCD through inter-ministerial committees and policy documents, which I have followed through my fieldwork. Further, I followed a group of policy actors involved in seed security and diversity, hereafter referred to as the seed initiative group. The policy world of seeds was ideal for teasing out paradoxes to understand how the actors react to them and find meaning, as seed systems are regulated through different policy arenas, primarily agriculture, environment and trade, with large incoherence between them (Louwaars, 2007).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To explore meaning-making and how it affects policy processes, I have guided the writing of the thesis around the following research questions: How do Norwegian state and non-state actors involved in developing food systems policies navigate contradictions between political spheres? How do power relations and meaning among the actors affect the work for coherence in development policy? Through different cases, I also explored more specific questions. In my case on seed policies, I looked at how actors working with seed policies navigate internal tensions and how their navigation affects their role in relation to other sectors. Looking specifically at efforts for obtaining policy coherence, I examined what work the initiatives for policy coherence do and whose interests they promote. Lastly, I explored how actors within seed policy relate to specific paradoxes with other political sectors, in this case, trade policies compromising farmers' rights.

## METHODOLOGY

My fieldwork took place in Oslo, Norway, during the COVID-19 pandemic, within the political sphere of development policy focused on food systems and seed security. The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the nature of my fieldwork. I collected data physically and online, depending on feasibility concerning pandemic restrictions, and the data collection lasted from March to November 2021. However, I followed the meetings of the seed initiative group until completing this thesis in May 2022. I traced seed policies specifically, and attended events and searched for documents focused on food systems in development policy. I used this dual focus to understand how policy actors work for policy coordination across sectors and investigate paradoxes between seed politics and other political topics.

Several former experiences of mine inspired the choice of topic. Writing my bachelor's degree, I became interested in seed systems. Seeds have immense cultural value for farmers, and

maintaining their diversity is crucial for protecting global biodiversity and food security. Nevertheless, farmers are increasingly being criminalised and repressed. My interest in policy coherence started when I worked for a Norwegian youth NGO, learning the importance of preventing one area of policies from undermining efforts in another. Uniting these two topics of interest, I read the work of Niels Louwaars (2007), stating that seed systems are regulated mainly through three different policy arenas; agriculture, environment and trade, with large incoherencies between them. In the context of the rising emphasis on 'food systems' globally and in Norway (see FAO, 2018; The Norwegian Government, 2019), I saw this thesis as an opportunity to examine how the new systemic cross-sectoral approach to food is manoeuvred within the everyday lives of relevant policy actors.

My fieldwork commenced by attending national and international webinars to map the field. I was made aware of these events through social media networks. I attended both specific webinars on seeds and debates about sustainable food systems. These webinars and interviews helped me identify the most important and relevant policy documents. Regarding my first interviews, a conversation with a former contact in civil society provided me with three prominent names in the field; hence I started my interview process by contacting them.

### Access

Studying policy worlds anthropologically means analysing informal networks in addition to the visible ones. However, gaining access to the everyday lives of political elites can prove challenging (Shore, 2010; Tate, 2020). Mosse (2011) points out the demanding task of obtaining information about social relations in the field, as the ethnographic subjects refuse to be portrayed in particular ways. Before commencing my fieldwork, I expected to feel bothersome as I assumed I would interfere with their busy work schedules and, consequently, receive rejections of my requests to meet. Additionally, I believed that much information would be unavailable to me. However, gaining access to my field proved easier than expected.

Several factors can explain my straightforward experience of getting into the field. First, the Norwegian policy world for seed systems contains a small number of actors who know each other well and collaborate frequently. Thus, it has proven easy to map the most central actors through webinars and interviews where other research participants have mentioned colleagues relevant to my research. Second, as the field is small, the research participants have expressed that they were happy to contribute. They appreciated the interest and hoped to see more recruitment for jobs in seed policy. Third, I have built on my network and previous connections to relevant political actors and found myself in advantageous positions for obtaining trust. My

master's scholarship at a research institute where they study seed diversity was a considerable advantage. The researchers there invited me to join the informal yet closed political meetings on the Norwegian seed initiative for the United Nations Food Systems Summit 2021 (UNFSS), UN conferences and other meetings. Fourth, as Salverda and Abbink (2012) argued, in contrast to how ordinary people or researchers view elites, 'elites' usually do not see themselves as a homogenous unreachable group. Hence my expectations of difficulties gaining access were larger than the reality.

**Constructing the field**

My fieldwork consists of multi-sited ethnography. Some anthropologists show scepticism towards multi-sited analysis, as the ethnographer can lose out on contextual information and explanations of the causality concerning different events (Fangen, 2010). However, as I did not wish to examine organisational culture in-depth but rather policy culture and processes, the policy actors are not situated together in one specific place in my field. They gather in short meetings, events and ad hoc projects. Thus there might not have been so much contextual information to lose out on (Fangen, 2010). Moreover, several scholars have argued for the need for anthropology to integrate the hybrid and fluid nature of the global society to study social change accurately (see Gullestad, 2011; Gupta & Ferguson, 1992; Hannerz, 2003; Li, 2014a; Marcus, 1995; Passaro, 1997; Peck & Theodore, 2012; Tsing, 2005). Such analysis involves capturing the relationships between different sites, not merely those within them.

Shore and Wright (2011) stress the need to find a vantage point from which one can study how the various features of policymaking interrelate. I assembled information, conducted interviews, and mapped the relevant network during the spring and summer of 2021. However, in September, I got a unique opportunity to follow a policy when I was invited to attend the meetings about the Norwegian seed proposal connected to the UNFSS structure. This group became my vantage point. The group united researchers, farmers, civil society actors and bureaucrats in a forum where they revealed discourses in the field, discussed significant thematic tensions and mentioned relevant events. Many actors were also involved in larger processes introducing the food systems approach. I slowly built an understanding of the field from this group and mapped a network of actors, events, conferences, and meetings, which all have contributed to my analysis.

Initially, I wished to research actors in the three spheres of policy: agriculture, environment, and trade, in addition to actors working with policy coherence initiatives. However, the focus shifted in September with the meetings of the seed initiative group. First, the shift happened

because there were internal tensions within the sphere of seed policies, which I found analytically interesting for understanding processes for system thinking and policy coherence. Along similar lines, Ortner (1995, p. 177) asserts a great need to study "local categories of friction and tension" within movements working for a common cause. Second, giving equal focus to all three sectors would demand resources and time. I talked to some actors who worked with trade. However, I focused on a specific example of incoherence between agriculture and trade, namely the divergence between Norwegian domestic policy governing farmer's rights and our demands to developing countries through The European Free Trade Association (EFTA) agreements, as discussed in Chapter 6.

Instead of mapping incoherence between the three spheres, I focused on three aspects of policy incoherence. These are the EFTA example, internal tensions in the policy world for seeds, and efforts to enhance policy coherence for development (PCD) through the 'food systems' approach. Geertz (1973, cited in Archetti, 1984) argues that cultural analysis consists of guessing the meaning behind words, actions and claims. For this reason, we can never be sure that we manage to describe the whole cultural landscape, according to Geertz. Recognising that I will not manage to portray the whole policy world, I still find that my choice of topics can shed light on how policy actors navigate paradoxes in food policy and how they make meaning out of what they do. I have, on two occasions, presented my preliminary and final findings at the research institute where I held my scholarship. There, I received feedback from some research participants who valued my depiction of their policy world and acknowledged many of the presented results.

In these lines, I have chosen both to 'follow policies' as ethnographic objects, as suggested by Shore and Wright (2011) and Peck and Theodore (2012), and to examine related events and translations of policies into new contexts. I have followed the policy actors and relevant policy documents and committees through different locations and times. I chose this methodology to understand which elements were elevated or disappeared when policies were moved or translated between contexts and to discover social relations. The policies in focus have functioned as anthropological lenses for studying the actors and institutions surrounding them. Following the same actors in different contexts over time allowed me to reveal context-based information, e.g., when research participants expressed themselves differently in a formal meeting compared to an informal chat.

**The data material**

The research participants are bureaucrats from ministries and underlying agencies, civil society actors, researchers, and representatives from farmers' organisations. Most of them work with seed security, and several actors also work with more overarching food systems policies. A few of them work with trade policies specifically. Several of the participants are engaged in initiatives for policy coherence, but not all of the research participants engage with PCD. I have observed politicians in webinars and events but have not interacted with them directly. Norway mainly has two research institutions producing research on seed systems and plant genetic diversity, the Fridtjof Nansen Institute and the Norwegian University of Life Sciences, from which I interviewed researchers. I would presume that the research participants are all in an age range between thirty-five and sixty-five years old. I know they have been working within this thematic field for a long time, except for those in youth organisations. Most research participants hold permanent positions within their organisations. Those working with seeds are often either alone or among the few people working with seeds within their institution.

The data material consists of 14 one-to-one semi-structured interviews with bureaucrats in ministries and underlying agencies, civil society actors and researchers. Moreover, it contains data from participant observation in five United Nations conferences where Norwegian delegates were present, one preparatory meeting with the Norwegian delegation for a UN conference, 14 webinars hosted by Norwegian ministries, researchers, Norwegian and international NGOs and seven meetings with the Norwegian group behind the seed initiative for the UNFSS. Further, I have collected and analysed media articles, policy documents, political speeches, official letters, project documents for governmental development projects and podcasts, which according to Shore and Wright (2011, p. 15), "can all be read as significant cultural texts that shed light on the way policy problems are framed and contested".

Concerning interviews, I conducted some in offices, some digitally and some in more informal settings like cafes. I utilised a sound recorder, except for settings where I found it necessary to ease the atmosphere. Most meetings were held digitally because of the pandemic. As I will explain in chapter 2, to analyse documents, I utilised tools from practice-oriented document analysis presented by Asdal and Reinertsen (2020). These perspectives align with other anthropological contributions on how to comprehend documents (see a review of documents in anthropology by Hull, 2012). From their toolkit, I have chosen approaches that understand documents as tools and look at what they contribute to and enable and how they move and translate into different contexts.

**Positionality**

I wish to reflect on my position and former experience and how they might have affected the fieldwork and thesis writing. Foley (2002) discusses anthropologists' positions on reflexivity in contemporary ethnography and the value of integrating the researcher's self as an ethnographic tool. He argues for the need to acknowledge that we as scientists "speak as mere mortals from various historical, culture-bound standpoints" (Foley, 2002, p. 487), echoing scholars such as Evans-Pritchard (1976) and Haraway (1988). Anderson (2021) further asserts that engagement with reflexivity can produce more nuanced research. In agreement with these scholars, I consider my background to colour my interpretations and information obtained in the field.

I am a former political activist with a bachelor's degree in critical development studies and experience with policy design. These experiences undoubtedly influence my approach to anthropological work. Traditional anthropologists have worried that studies of political economy aspects moved away from the 'neutral' methodologies of scientific and social science (Foley, 2002). However, in line with scholars such as Bourgois (1990), Kirsch (2010) and Mintz (1985), I believe ethnography as a tool provides us with a privilege and unique opportunities for understanding the effects of economic systems and political processes on peoples' lives, and consequently a responsibility to convey these findings. Regarding this thesis, I see that anthropologists can bring essential perspectives on the occurrence of complexity and surprises in policymaking and the lives of policymakers to increase our understanding of how policies are shaped and of whom can shape them. Although, my political engagement might have coloured the perspectives in this thesis, I do not wish to provide political advocacy messages yet to produce anthropological reflections which consider political aspects.

Some anthropologists may consider my fieldwork as "insider"- and "hometown" ethnography (Anderson, 2021; Passaro, 1997). Beyond being born in the same city where I conducted fieldwork, I have worked for several years in Norwegian youth NGOs on topics of environment and agriculture. After these years, I started as a trainee in the Norwegian Mission to the UN agencies in Rome, followed by nearly two years in the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), working on Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems. Bringing these experiences into this study, I carried familiarity with topics, policy documents and relevant policy actors. Some anthropologists can question this familiarity as a notion has long existed that hometown ethnography fails to produce the sense of otherness and 'exoticism' required for anthropological investigation (Anderson, 2021).

I acknowledge that my prior knowledge could challenge my analytical curiosity. Fangen (2010) stresses the importance of first impressions in the field due to their lack of presumptions. When commencing fieldwork, I kept in mind that I might carry presumptions related to the research participants' discussions, concepts, and answers. I designed my interview questions accordingly and reminded myself to stay curious and keep asking questions, even when I believed I could foresee the reasoning of the research participants. As elaborated in my introduction, these conscious choices also helped me change my perspective from being a former activist wishing to deconstruct policy coherence initiatives to understand why they do not work and how to improve them, towards becoming increasingly curious about 'meaning'. In addition, I believe that my familiarity with both people and topics has brought essential advantages to this thesis.

The expressed 'invalidity' of hometown ethnographic research (Anderson, 2021; Collins & Gallinat, 2010) ignores essential factors. Madden (2017) appreciates familiarity between the researcher and research participants as the trust-building process facilitates much easier. My background knowledge of documents and topics has further supported my search for information and made it easier to know where to find relevant events. It has also been a significant advantage to know people while conducting fieldwork in a pandemic, as it has not been as easy to reach out to people physically. Agreeing with Neumann (2012), I find that my experience in policymaking also supported my understanding of the "microphysics of power". In his ethnography of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), he describes the advantages of "insider" ethnography:

> In fifteen years as a reader of politicians' speeches prior to my stint in the Foreign Ministry, I had not thought about the complexity of the genesis of speeches. That blindness speaks volumes about how isolated academics are from the microphysics of power, even when they are seemingly in constant interaction with practitioners. It also says a good deal about the advantage of ethnography as a form of data collection about social processes, and about the enormous advantages of researchers who have personal experience in the field they are researching. (Neumann, 2012, pp. 82, 84)

Further, concurring with Anderson (2021), I believe my relationship with the field was continually negotiated, despite being in a familiar setting. When visiting an NGO where I used to work, the whole staff greeted me. They invited me to join their lunch, and we chatted about everyday matters. I was conscious of creating an intellectual distance to familiar concepts and stories in this setting. On the contrary, visiting a ministry building, I was met with a security system where they did not trust my identification method. In general, I experienced an attitude of foreignness. Throughout the interview, I felt alienated and uncertain and more like the young student who was lucky to access the building rather than an "insider" in the field. Anderson

(2021) and Passaro (1997) propose that problematizing hometown ethnography as "insider anthropology" obscures uneven power relations and ambiguity that is found in any form of fieldwork. It further disregards that a researcher's identity is affected by "gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, class, and a host of other factors" (Anderson, 2021, p. 214). I have been navigating both familiar and unfamiliar settings during fieldwork.

**Methodological challenges**

Several methodological challenges have occurred during my period of fieldwork. The continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly affected my fieldwork to a large extent. Most meetings and conferences have taken place virtually, which allowed me to participate in more events than possible before the pandemic, being in Oslo, Rome, and South Africa virtually, all in the same week. However, it reduced my opportunities for physical interaction, observation of body language, networking and informal chats around events. The physical distance has also complicated the work to establish closer relations with the research participants, e.g., I have only had the chance to meet with them on Zoom during working hours and not during leisure.

However, I believe that the small network of actors allowed me to get to know several of them through interviews and meeting them again at other events. I further believe that conducting a multi-sited ethnography made it easier to navigate fieldwork during a pandemic. I did not rely on being physically present at one institution or in a specific physical or social environment over time. The pandemic restrictions were also lifted in Oslo from September to December 2021, facilitating more physical interaction. I have found it uncomplicated to facilitate interviews via Zoom. However, the physical meetings allowed me to observe the surroundings and body language, providing valuable information. As mentioned, the security systems for entering the buildings of the different ministries or agencies also constituted remarkable observations.

When partly conducting digital ethnography, it has been essential to reflect upon the nature of my participant observation, as the related ethical matters are more blurred than in offline fieldwork (Goralska, 2020). It is easy to end up "hiding" in digital meetings if being an observer, making your research participants less attentive to your note-taking and general presence. Pointing to this passivity in digital spaces, Goralska (2020) and Murthy (2008) stress that we must evaluate the act of 'lurking' and its consequences for research participants. Here, I have been conscientious about changing my approach to whether the space is public or private. Concerning public webinars, I considered my participation equal to participating physically in

a public event or watching TV. Therefore, I did not seek explicit informed consent to use data. In private meetings, I felt like I was 'lurking' on a few occasions because the participants could potentially forget my presence. However, I always sought consent at the beginning of the meeting. Regarding meetings where the seed initiative group have met with external agencies, and it was not polite of me to intervene requesting consent, I made sure to not use the data of the members who had not previously consented.

I contemplated how to participate in policymaking activities before entering the field. Making contributions to policymaking of any value necessitates a particular role or position. Thus, the degree of participation has varied. During international digital conferences, I was one of many hundreds or thousands of participants with low visibility for the organisers. In meetings with the seed security initiative, I was visible with a camera and microphone, I was welcomed to the meeting by the host, and everyone knew of my participation. However, there was no space for me to comment or contribute. When participating with my contact person from the research institute, I had the chance to discuss events after the meeting. I have had little opportunity to intervene or interact with the actors in official meetings.

Nevertheless, other ethnographers studying policies have faced similar challenges regarding participation, forcing them to adopt more creative methodological strategies (see multiple chapters in Shore & Wright, 2011). Similar to Peck and Theodore (2012, p. 26), I adopted "a judicious combination of observations, documentary analysis, and depth interviews, as a means of probing, interrogating, and triangulating issues around the functioning of global policy networks". They point at a challenge with interviews as managing to move beyond the "official representation" to receive data on social and political aspects. However, most of my interviewees quickly became comfortable and were surprisingly open in their sharing. I managed to build trust as they met me in several contexts, heard of me from other colleagues, and I could refer to contact with their partners, showing that I know the field. Since my range of movement between different contexts was broad, I could acquire systemic information. I attended meetings with the research participants when working in FAO at the beginning of the fieldwork. Even though these meetings are not part of my data material, I understand how it is to be an active participant in these settings.

I encountered some challenges when writing the thesis. First, as a small part of the data was collected during a hectic work period in FAO, I did not write out these notes until later, which could entail that I have misunderstood a few of my field notes when using them for analysis. Additionally, several research participants put some restrictions on the use of the provided

information. They gave fascinating remarks yet followed their remark with a comment of such nature: "Do not quote me on this", "This is a bit off the record", and "I do not think I should say this". These situations put me in a dilemma as such remarks provided me with the most interesting findings of the fieldwork. I avoided using some but integrated other findings into a more general analysis where the research participants' phrases cannot be traced.

Doing anthropology "at home", my roles as friend, girlfriend and family member have not been set on pause. Thus, in contrast to people doing fieldwork abroad, my social life and distractions from work likely interfered more with the treasured ethnographic 'immersiveness' during fieldwork (as elaborated in Robben & Sluka, 2012). However, as mentioned, it has not been possible to observe the research participants full time due to the nature of their work. After quitting my job and starting my scholarship at the research institute, I also had plenty of time to focus on collecting data from various. Moreover, in their review of anthropological fieldwork through history, Robben and Sluka (2012) portray the division of 'home' and 'the field' as outdated and largely disappearing in contemporary anthropology, a significant reason being social media and increased global interconnectedness.

## Ethical considerations

Before commencing fieldwork, I notified and obtained approval of my research project from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), and I have stored all data according to their criteria. All research participants received an information and consent form created according to standards from NSD, and they had to provide written or oral consent for their participation. The application process for approval from NSD helped me design my interview guide, as their criteria and questions made me more aware of what information I needed and what I should avoid, such as collecting political standpoints.

I have deliberately utilised 'research participant' rather than the frequently used 'informant'. Waltorp (2020, p. 9) states that "'Informant' might be perceived as a dated term that implies the problematic history and even violence of the anthropological endeavour of knowing-as-ruling minorities, indigenous people, and colonised people. The term carries a lot of baggage". Waltorp insists that by utilising it consciously, one respects this history. However, as Robben and Sluka (2012) used, I find that' research participants' is an appropriate term to avoid any disrespect. Further, the research participants participate in the knowledge-making process, not solely inform it.

I made several choices regarding protecting the anonymity of the research participants and ensuring accurate representations. Because of their small and close-knit sphere, I have chosen

to exclude as many personal details as possible, often merely referring to their work category. This choice might appear strange in light of traditional anthropological fieldwork. Hannerz (2003) claims that anthropologists take a romantic view of their fields and relationships, requiring vivid descriptions. However, as Hannerz (2003, p. 208) describes in his multi-sited ethnography of foreign correspondents, I was not trying to study these people's 'entire culture and social life'. Instead, I studied the 'local ecology of their activities' to inform how it affects their work and the sense-making of their work. I still attempt to share these peoples' relevant stories to inform the thesis. Nevertheless, removing identity markers has been a vital choice to avoid any unforeseen consequences, e.g. risks elaborated by Mosse (2011) connected to researching development professionals, such as undermining their professionalism and potentially damaging their work.

Nevertheless, when researching a small political environment, it is nearly impossible to rule out all identification markers without ruling out the stories and contributions of the research participants. Thus, I offer the research participants a "fragile anonymity". They come from unique institutions with specific traits, and they all know each other. Hence there is a risk of recognition amongst the participants internally. Regarding quotes from the research participants, the speech is translated from Norwegian to English, and I have tried to keep the text close to how they expressed themselves. I utilised fictitious names for some of the actors when I referred to them multiple times in a row. However, I consider this choice more of a storytelling technique rather than a sign of having closer relationships with these actors. I avoided using names in most thesis sections to prevent the reader from concluding the research participants' identities.

There are other methodological and ethical issues related to the issue of anonymity which can occur while doing ethnography of expert communities. Mosse (2011, p. 53) portrays challenging situations arising from the return of his ethnography to his research participants, from development organisations, where they made "objections and claims of harm to professional reputations". He discusses how the concept of professionalism relies on the denial of constraints, informal roles and social relationships related to work, the same factors under scrutiny in this ethnography. I see the potential for similar reactions among the research participants and have strived to present my material fairly, anonymously, and accurately. One of the bureaucrats participating in this project explicitly said that it was critical for him that I write my thesis positively and fairly to avoid discouraging the many hard-working souls out there trying to make a difference.

In that regard, I wish to reflect on the consequences of conducting this study, apart from the potential to affect policy actors' 'professionalism'. The research participants have shown great passion for their work to promote farmers' rights and seed diversity. Chapter 3 will highlight that these positions are considered controversial within global debates and are of low visibility and interest on the national agenda. In his studies of resistance movements, Nilsen (2016) points out how studies of friction within social movements or projects headed towards social change risk puncturing their resistance projects by highlighting 'flaws'. My field is not a social movement but a policy world consisting of different constituencies. Nevertheless, because of their shared passion for the topic and the low visibility of seeds on the agenda, I find it relevant to consider the risk underscored by Nilsen.

However, Nilsen (2016) also acknowledged that social movements contain internal power relations and different comprehensions of the accuracy of strategies. Related to this, Ortner (1995, p. 177) claimed a significant lack of studies that recognise the "local categories of friction and tension", not merely tensions between the 'resisting' and 'dominating'. She asserts that we must conduct such analysis to avoid romanticisation and to respect the complexity of their world. Similarly, I argue that recognising and learning about power imbalances and tensions within the policy world for seeds is vital for strengthening their work. One can address the tensions to aim for enhanced collaboration instead of neglecting them. Examining the failure of policy coherence efforts can also provide insights which can support further endeavours.

## OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

I have divided the thesis into seven chapters, including the introduction and conclusion. After the introduction, chapter 2 attempts to conceptualize policies and the role of meaning and power in policy making. Chapter 3 presents concepts and political trends that constitute a helpful backdrop for understanding the policy actors' meaning-making processes. Chapter 4 introduces the policy world of seeds, utilising the analytical tool of *tensions* to tease out the meaning held by each actor. I argue that the actors maintain a fragile harmony. Among others, I draw on Goffman (1992) and ethnographies of Norwegian political life to show how this harmony unfolds as valuable, if not vital, for the involved policy actors. Chapter 5 explores what work policies for PCD do, how the actors find meaning in this work and whose interests the policies promote. Chapter 6 looks into how many policy actors working with seeds show indifference when facing paradoxes with trade policies. Neoliberal influences make it difficult for them to engage without facing meaninglessness. This chapter also discusses how the actors' portrayal of the state substantiates their meaning-making processes.

# Chapter 2: Conceptualising Policy

During fieldwork, I asked all research participants, "How do you work with policy?". Some participants referred to governmental processes for creating policy documents such as strategies or action plans or negotiations around the state budget. Some said that "policy is everything", while others denied that they work with policy. I discuss more responses in chapter 4. However, I discovered during fieldwork that policies are complex entities that can create new social organisations, travel into diverse contexts, translate into new meanings, and engender new and surprising processes, concurring with scholars in the emerging field of anthropology of policy. In this chapter, I develop my analytical framework by conceptualising policies from an anthropological point of view. I draw extensively on contributions by Chris Shore and Susan Wright. They saw the need to distinguish anthropological studies of policy from political anthropology because they wished to draw attention to power elites through "studying up" (Shore & Wright, 2011). I find that the following excerpt by Salverda and Abbink (2012, p. 8) describes well the gap that I hope this thesis and other contributions on policy can contribute to satisfying:

> A curious fact is that academic insights about the power, influence, and behavior of elites have not run parallel with the fact of their increasing global role and impact. (…) Anthropology, the study with a qualitative approach par excellence, could have filled the gap; yet it has, generally speaking, continued to focus on the marginalized and the less powerful. However, understanding the position of the latter is enhanced by better insights in the actions and choices of elites.

Another reason for investigating policymaking is that policies are tools for organizing political life, especially in Western countries. Thus, policies constitute valuable ethnographic tools for opening windows to significant processes of power and social change (Shore & Wright, 2011). Shore and Wright mention the importance of studying power and meaning to highlight essential features of policies. In this thesis, I bring in other theory on power and meaning to supplement with more detail the framework provided by Shore and Wright. I have also integrated ethnographic perspectives on two central artefacts of policy work, documents and meetings, to reveal the social relations of policymaking.

## CRITICISM OF CONVENTIONAL POLICY APPROACHES

Approaches from the anthropology of policy stand in contrast to conventional policy analysis conducted in other social sciences and fall under what some call 'interpretive policy studies' (Shore & Wright, 2011). Però (2011) and Shore and Wright (2011) claim that scholars in

political sciences and international relations, and often policy practitioners, portray people as passively formed by policies they are governed by, created by a rational authority. They further point to linear depictions of policy processes: identifying a problem, finding an appropriate solution and then moving to implementation. Shore and Wright (2011) find that these depictions often omit complexity, surprises and the social relations that contribute to the development and trajectories of policies. Still, some political scientists identify with the 'interpretive turn' supporting the arguments of Shore and Wright (see Arrona & Zabala-Iturriagagoitia, 2019; Fischer, 2003; Peters & Pierre, 2006; Yanow, 2007). Bringing in this distinction of policy studies has been important for my analysis, as policy practitioners sometimes hold similar views seeing policies as 'objective entities', and omit attention to social relations surrounding them.

Shore and Wright examine how policy recipients contest and navigate policies and shape policymaking processes. They accept that policies work as 'instruments of rule' but refuse to let this image narrow down possibilities for studying policy and its effects (Shore & Wright, 2011). To illustrate the difference between policy studies in anthropology and political science, Shore and Wright (2011) apply the example of political speeches. Whilst political scientists may analyse the content of the speech and its political implications, for anthropologists, it is more valuable to study people's reactions to it, their thoughts about it and how it impacts their relations and daily lives. I do not neglect the importance of political decisions and their impacts in my thesis. However, emphasis on social relations and meaning is relevant because all actors working with policymaking connect different meanings to new political approaches, which influence their actions and how they implement or react to these initiatives.

As mentioned, Shore (2010) argues that there was a lack of ethnographic studies of political elites also within the discipline of anthropology. More ethnographic work on elites has been conducted since (see Abram, 2017; Brown et al., 2017; Marcus, 1983; Salverda & Abbink, 2012; Schijf, 2012), but the field can still be considered an anthropological 'niche'. Anthropologists of development have analysed policies' effects on societies and cultures. However, these contributions do not fill the alleged gap in analyses of political elites working with development policies. Still, there are some contributions on elites in development policy (among those Lie, 2015; Mosse, 2011; Müller, 2011; Wedel, 2005), yet they are not in abundance. Hence, I hope this thesis can be a contribution to illuminating policymakers' realities and perspectives and how these affect development policies.

I consider overlapping approaches between political anthropology and the anthropology of policy regarding studies of policies' effects on populations. However, adding to the focus on

elites, I find the definitions of *policy* and *politics* provided by Shore (2010) to support my understanding of the distinction between the subdisciplines. Shore (2010, p. 604) states that 'politics' refers to "the whole realm of power relations and the relationship between government and the governed, and all the debates around forms of governance". 'Policy' refers to "something more specific (…) and includes all those ideas and codified formulas that governments use to bring about their particular political visions". Although political anthropologists may look directly at policymaking, I understand the anthropology of policy as unique because the analytical framework explicitly utilises policies as methodological tools as windows onto larger processes, 'following a policy' as suggested by Shore and Wright (2011).

## APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK

Shore and Wright (2011) argue that anthropologists hold tools to comprehend meanings held by policymakers and their interpretations of processes they are part of. Shore (2010, p. 604) further elaborates on how we can understand policies as 'programmes for action', drawing lines to Bruno Latour, seeing policies as "actants", "objects that have a degree of agency and often very complex social lives". Adding to the complexity, Shore and Wright (2011) accentuate how policies are also concurrently represented by numerous people in different contexts.

I wish to emphasize some aspects of policy which will guide this thesis. In line with the notion of policies as organising principles, instead of necessarily looking at precisely what a policy is, I will look at what a policy does. First, the anthropology of policy allows for understanding how policies come about and are developed through power struggles and built on complex social relations. Second, Shore and Wright (2011, p. 11) emphasise how policy "creates links between agents, institutions, technologies and discourses and brings all these diverse elements into alignment that makes it analytically productive". This shows the utility of policy as an object of study for displaying the creation of new social organisations and relations. Third, as policies unite different actors across sectors and places, following Shore and Wright (2011), throughout this thesis, I wish to consider the importance of peoples' meaning-making in policy processes and what they make out of the policies. Their meaning can also be understood by looking at their practices. Fourth, Shore and Wright (2011, p. 1) point out how policy "finds expression through sequences of events". Thus, an essential aspect of anthropology of policy is to trace the travel of policies between contexts, study translations that happen in the intersection of contexts, the relations to policy makers, and what relations the policies create.

When policies travel, they can engender outcomes that diverge from the objectives envisioned by the policy creators (Shore & Wright, 2011). As discussed in chapter 4, the seed initiative

group's policy proposal has travelled and been 'translated' between various contexts. Shore and Wright (2011, p. 14) elaborate on how each move "necessarily entails a re-translation from one genre to another, opening up space for further contestation". The seed proposal was interpreted in new ways in international contexts. As I show in chapter 4, some group members became afraid that the proposal would be misinterpreted as a new radical political position in Norway. Thus, they wished to stop utilizing the policy document. Looking at the differences between policy studies of different disciplines, Shore and Wright (2011) claim that political sciences focus on resemblances between the different contexts instead of changes in meaning connected to policy translations, thereby losing valuable information.

To grasp the range of actors involved in or affecting policymaking and the range of elements organised around a political process, I adopt 'policy world' by Shore and Wright (2011). Initially, I found 'policy space' to be a relevant term as I am looking at a space organised by policy processes. However, the term 'policy space' can be confused with a nation state's available autonomy to pursue policies for their economic development while considering international economic cooperation or other interests. Policy worlds cover the different elements, actors, agents, discourses, research, technologies, and beliefs connected to a specific political topic (Shore & Wright, 2011).

## INVESTIGATING POWER AND CONSTRAINTS

The conceptualisation of 'policy world' resembles the Foucauldian concept of *dispositif*. However, I will utilise 'policy world' to describe the grouping of actors and elements and their relations and practices, whilst *dispositif* is a helpful lens for focusing on power relations and how these assemblages liberate and constrain behaviour. Many anthropologists have looked at international organisations as *dispositifs* (Müller, 2013). As per the definition of Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983, as cited in Shore & Wright, 2011), *dispositif* entails the assemblage of practices, establishments, provisions, legislation, science, philosophy and morals framing a policy world, constituting a space which can constrain behaviour. *Dispositif* has helped analyse relations between different constituencies in the policy space, such as civil society and state actors, and understanding what factors limit or strengthen their influence on policymaking processes.

With a *dispositif*, actors can take part in creating norms and rules, which they are in turn constrained by (Abélès, 1986 & Boudon and Bourricaud, 1986, in Müller, 2011). Shore and Wright refer to Müller (2011), who studied how individuals and groups interacted with FAO, understanding the institution as part of a *dispositif*. Müller asserted that FAO's *dispositif*

engaged civil society actors through various participatory approaches to produce what was later presented as de-politicised "neutral" policy guidance, often going against the interests of the civil society actors. However, as they participated in the policymaking processes, instead of choosing strategies of resistance, she looked at these actors' struggle to maintain *counter-conduct*, a Foucauldian term referring to the "struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others" (Foucault et al., 2007). When a person cannot uphold a clear differentiation between himself or herself and the other, according to Müller, that person can only make 'tactical' calculations. Such operations take place in spaces where the actor is forced to follow the logic or organisation laid out for them, the constraints of a *dispositif*. "Then actors must constantly play with events in order to transform them into opportunities for making an impact that may not last." (Müller, 2011, p. 284). I will look at these dynamics particularly in relation to multistakeholder forums and processes hosted by Norwegian ministries.

## CRITIQUE OF THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF POLICY

The approaches to power analysis found in Shore and Wright's conceptualisation of policy, mainly the Foucauldian concepts, have received some criticism. In a volume on anthropology of policy from 1997 (see Shore & Wright, 1997), they utilised 'governmentality' approaches, a Foucauldian term that can be understood as the systematic methods citizens are governed. Shore and Wright argued that these approaches helped comprehend complex processes of contemporary forms of governmental power (Shore & Wright, 2011). Their publication from 2011 conveys that they received criticism for giving too little weight to individual agency. Critics accused them of depicting individuals as 'passive bodies' produced by and acting within a regime of corrective power (Shore & Wright, 2011). This exchange of criticism joins the ranks of a longstanding debate on the interplay between structure and agency in society (see Cleaver, 2012; Long, 2001; Però, 2011).

However, Shore and Wright considered this criticism to be a misinterpretation. They believe that governors may try to enforce standards on those they seek to control. However, people can be sceptical and comprehend how these policies seek to arbitrate their lives, using this understanding to fight back (Shore & Wright, 2011). I particularly value their emphasis on how actors have unequal positions of power but can utilise their creativity to navigate the struggle for influence and strive to shape the policy world according to their interests, which I have observed during fieldwork. When actors cannot reverse a policy, they can strategically make the policy function differently than what was envisioned by its creators, e.g. adding their take through the translation of policies between contexts (Shore & Wright, 2011). I elaborate on the

criticism directed at Shore and Wright to show how I will also strive to balance elements of agency and power, particularly giving attention to how actors use creativity to navigate these processes.

## POLICY WORLDS AS 'DOMAINS OF MEANING'

The individual's agency connects strongly to the importance of 'meaning' in policymaking, which I emphasise heavily throughout this thesis. Shore and Wright consider policy worlds to be 'domains of meaning'. Policies can create new 'webs of meaning', and Shore and Wright (2011) argue that anthropologists can identify the cultural logics framing the policy worlds through their study of meaning. As they do not elaborate substantially on the content and definition of meaning, I draw on remarks by Clifford Geertz, a renowned scholar arguing for the importance of 'meaning' for anthropology. As explained in the methodology section, he claims that cultural analysis consists of guessing the meaning behind words, actions and claims (Geertz, 1973, cited in Archetti, 1984). However, Geertz never formally defined meaning. Therefore I build on Ortner (1997, p. 138) and her perception of Geertz's understanding of meaning as "a set of culturally constructed and historically specific guides, frames, or models of and for human feeling, intention, and action". I will then study what factors and frames that affect policy actors' feelings, intentions, and actions and how these shape policymaking and policy coordination processes on food systems.

Ortner (1997, p. 138) underscores Geertz's contributions as vital since they contested "the view of society as a machine", in line with Shore and Wright's criticism of conventional policy studies. However, Ortner also problematised his position. She asserts that his arguments created a binary conflict between Geertz's interpretive cultural analysis and the "bad" positivistic functional analysis, which excludes opportunities for studying power, domination, and social asymmetry, as these fall under mechanistic perspectives. Arguably, Geertz attempted to address the state and political culture, as seen in his study of the Balinese state, bringing meaning into his analysis of political systems. However, Ortner (1997) claims that he overstated the cultural aspects of power compared to its operating dimensions. If strictly utilising Geertz's approach, this then complicates the ability of anthropology to reveal relations of power and difference. On the other hand, as Ortner (1997) points out, Foucauldian theory ironically excluded the element of meaning, in line with the criticism received by Shore and Wright.

Thus, in this thesis, I will employ Geertz's notion of meaning to guide my understanding of policy actions. I will combine it with Foucauldian concepts to allow for disclosures of power and structure. This choice is in line with the methodology suggested by Shore and Wright

(2011) and with arguments made by Ortner (1997). By unifying emphasis on meaning and emphasis on power, we can reveal both the 'effects' of policies concerning operations of power and how they are again affected by peoples' 'meanings'.

Finally, while discussing meaning-making, I wish to elaborate on the implications of meaninglessness. Engelke and Tomlinson (2007) claim that failure analysis can allow researchers to consider meaning not as a product to be revealed or just for its functionality but as a process and potential beset with insecurity and disputation. They argue that we must recognise moments of failure and 'meaninglessness' to understand meaning and meaningfulness. Moreover, they consider a paradox of meaninglessness, presented by Gershon (2007), namely that something "meaningless" is "so understood by virtue of its position within a meaningful system" (Engelke & Tomlinson, 2007, p. 18). This paradox entails that attention to a failure and meaninglessness supports our understanding of an actor's meaning, as it reveals the system of meaning as reference to their failure. Avoiding meaninglessness has also seemed to be a driver for the choices of many of the policy actors I have studied.

## TOOLS OF POLICYMAKING

Wright (2006) states that studying a policy space with an anthropological lens involves looking at people, procedures, texts, and documents concerning a particular topic. My search for documents and attendance in and discussion about meetings have eased my efforts to uncover social relations, policy travel, and meaning-making. For these reasons, I found it helpful to extend the perspectives of Shore and Wright (2011) with remarks by scholars working with ethnographies of bureaucratic documents and meetings.

### The analytical value of documents
Bureaucratic documents have received low interest from anthropologists over the years, as Brenneis (2006, p. 42) puts it "in large part because of their very ordinariness". However, Latour (2005, p. 39) argues that their analytical value comes forth ones we treat them as mediators, entities that "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry". Asdal and Reinertsen (2020) further argue that studying documents in public administration and politics is of great importance and highly interesting. They highlight how closely approaching the work behind, and the movement of documents can help us reveal complex and unpredictable patterns and internal tensions. We can find people with power finding themselves in situations of powerlessness.

Briet (2006 [1951], as cited in Mitchell, 2007), defined a document as "any concrete or symbolic indexical sign, preserved or recorded toward the ends of representing, of

reconstituting, or of proving a physical or intellectual phenomenon". Asdal and Reinertsen (2020) explain that this understanding of a document entails seeing it as containing *action* through *documenting* something and being *relational*. It creates a connection to something or someone external to the document. Asdal and Reinertsen (2020) provide a framework for practice-oriented document analysis. Among other methodological approaches, they suggest seeing documents as tools and looking at what they contribute to and enable. Another approach is looking at the movements of the documents. What do the documents move, and how are they understood once they travel into new spheres? How are the reactions from outer spheres and other actors incorporated by authorities? The messages and content of documents can often change and sharpen in the "translations" between different document places. Such remarks support the argument by Shore and Wright (2011) regarding processes of travel and re-translations of policies here concerning policy documents.

I have adopted elements from Asdal and Reinertsen (2020) about analysing aspects of *action, relations* and *documentation* in my data and looking at documents as tools and their movements. These approaches have allowed me to study how policy documents, such as the action plan for sustainable food systems or the Norwegian proposal for seed security, are used by different actors and how their significance and meaning change according to context. I also utilise these perspectives to show how these documents create new social organisations, such as new informal groups, become essential tools for advocacy for civil society, as was not intended initially and ignite new political proposals.

## Ethnographies of meetings

Documents are essential artefacts for political life, including the organisation of meetings. The circulation of documents before, after and at meetings is not just vital for equipping participants with essential information and making the meeting purposeful. They contribute to the very organisation of the meeting (Abram, 2017). They further connect a meeting to the organisation's framework and place the meeting in a larger context (Abram, 2017). Brown et al. (2017) state that meetings are ethnographically interesting because they move beyond simply representing perspectives within documents to allow complexities to materialise that are not reducible to the written reports. The arguments of Brown et al. (2017) then imply that meetings become areas where ethnographers have the opportunity to discover these reactions. I have also experienced during fieldwork that focusing on the lack of preparatory documents for meetings or lack of minutes can constitute useful ethnographic information on power relations between the meeting's participants, as discussed in chapter 4.

In their suggested approach for ethnographies of meetings, Brown et al. (2017, p. 11) point to the anthropological relevance of meetings as double, by being "boringly, even achingly, familiar routines", yet also as "specific and productive arenas in which realities are dramatically negotiated". According to Schwartzman (1989, cited in Abram, 2017), these "boring routines" can be essential rituals necessary for legitimising and giving credibility to the institution, thus contributing to its reproduction and development. Some meetings' strictly routine-based and formal nature might also come from the wish to portray meetings as negotiations guided by reason and logical methods when they contain compromises of relationships and power struggles (Schwartzman, 1989, cited in Sherry, 1991). Because of these possible tensions, Schwartzman (1989, cited in Brenneis, 1991, p. 495) states that "meetings are significant for what they are and what they entail, rather than for what might be decided within them". These perspectives have helped me detect inter-personal relations and power structures in the meetings I attended, rather than solely focusing on the decision-making and outcomes.

Meetings are also vital artefacts for studying the elements of 'meaning' and power in policymaking. Meetings can offer the participants a sense of organisation, feelings of commitment to the institution, and a notion of where they belong within the institution (Schwartzman, 1989, in Abram, 2017). Similarly, Brown et al. (2017, p. 15) state that meetings are organised to evoke actions on their own terms, and how "meetings are full of capacity; at least this is what participants often wish to claim." This became visible through several examples from my fieldwork, where the frames around the meetings created expectations for the outcomes. Evans (2017, in Brown et al., 2017) further highlights how the conflicting parties in the meetings rarely leave meetings without hostilities and emotions following them further, illustrating how the actors' feelings and interests connect to the bureaucratic meetings.

Concerning power relations and the concept of *dispositif,* the agenda-setting of meetings can constitute important information for studying the frames and constraints affecting policy actors. The actors who set the agenda can often steer the direction of the process, and the ones who record or edit the minutes can influence how the outcomes of the meeting are presented and interpreted. Other participants may have limited opportunities for influencing the outcomes. In her ethnography of the bureaucratic process of urban regeneration in London, Evans (2017) displays how bureaucratic meetings act as instruments for limited forms of empowerment.

Meetings are essential arenas where the interplay between power, creativity and individual agency surface. However, whether such relations are available to the ethnographer can vary depending on the formality of the meeting. Reading the meeting documents requires contextual

information, as they always point to external events outside of the meeting and contain 'coded language' necessitating prior knowledge (Abram, 2017). Thus, there are risks that ethnographers can lose out on important information discussed or produced in other forums. However, these factors also point to the value of ethnography, one of the few methods taking the time to grasp the material and daring to deconstruct the seemingly obvious, thus creating the potential for obtaining necessary information from different contexts. Further, Evans (2017) states that meetings create spaces for tackling conflicting actions related to the same matter of concern and "appear as authoritative and 'polite' navigations of complex political fields" (Evans, 2017, in Brown et al., 2017, p. 16). To move beyond politeness and formality and understand the complexity and necessary contextual information, I found it helpful to talk informally with the actors in other settings, as the information given to me differed depending on the context.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

This thesis draws on theory from the anthropology of policy to study how policies are created and negotiated and reveal the social relations around them. I will look at how the policies travel and carry new meanings in new contexts and how peoples' meaning-making connected to policies can shape and give a new direction to policy processes. Regarding 'meaning', I will pay attention to which factors guide actors' feelings, intentions and actions and their effects on policymaking. On the other hand, I utilise the concepts *dispositif, tactical calculations* and *counter-conduct* to reveal power relations between the state and non-state actors through looking at assemblages of factors affecting policy worlds, which constrain or liberate the policy actors. These elements will be studied by utilising documents and meetings as windows into policy processes.

# Chapter 3: Setting the Stage for Understanding Meaning-Making in the Policy World of Food

To expand on paradoxes in Norwegian foreign policy and allow for an understanding of the research participants' meaning-making processes as they navigate paradoxes, I find it necessary to explain some political developments. In this chapter, I first look into Norway's "good state" brand, sometimes colliding with Norway's national interests. I find that this set of ideas affects meaning-making among bureaucrats and politicians. Further, I will elaborate briefly on work conducted for Policy Coherence for Development (PCD), a particularly relevant backdrop for chapter 5, and then introduce the 'food systems' approach to illuminate a central concept for this thesis. Lastly, I expand on definitions and discussions within the political sphere of seeds, constituting frames affecting the meaning-making of actors working with seeds, as discussed in chapters 4 and 6.

## NORWAY AS THE 'GOOD STATE'

In 1992, former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland (1992) said: "Being good is typically Norwegian" *[In Norwegian: Typisk norsk å være god]*. This idea stayed with Norwegians and is utilised in popular culture and political environments. Scholars of international relations and political sciences have also discussed the idea of Norway as a 'good' state (see Browning, 2021; de Bengy Puyvallée & Bjørkdahl, 2021; de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014). They highlight how this idea often contributes to creating paradoxes as it collides with domestic interests. Browning (2021, p. 17) argues for a 'stickiness' to Norway's "good state" brand in national and international settings, resulting partly from Norwegian practices of "doing good" and partly from "'being seen to be doing good' through active branding strategies".

Through fieldwork, I experienced that Norway's 'good state' brand contributes to cultural frames affecting the meaning-making processes of Norwegian bureaucrats and politicians. Bjørkdahl (2021), Håskoll-Haugen (2022), and de Carvalho and Neumann (2014) point at the motivation behind active branding as the inability to compete with larger countries concerning economic, political or military force. Thus, Norway concentrates on forms of soft power, such as humanitarianism, contributions to peace processes and a leading role in sustainability efforts,

what Wohlforth et al. (2018) call 'a policy of involvement'. According to the abovementioned scholars, this policy does not only grant Norway international goodwill and social and political capital yet has also established itself as a representation from which meaning and identity are created, both for Norwegians and foreigners (Browning, 2021; Tvedt, 2007). One example from my fieldwork illustrating this point is when a bureaucrat working with seeds, in a meeting with an external partner, stated that "Norway is a country who believes that 'You do not need to be big to contribute very well'".

Several of the abovementioned scholars question how Norway maintains an image as a global Good Samaritan whilst being a large-scale fossil polluter and conducting human rights violations in several spheres (Bjørkdahl, 2021; Browning, 2021; Håskoll-Haugen, 2022). Norway gives millions to rainforest protection yet goes into trade agreements that will intensify rainforest deforestation (ATTAC Norway, 2020). We play 'climate champion', but we get awarded "Fossil of the Day" at COP26 for our vast oil production (Climate Action Network International, 2021). We present ourselves as great defenders of human rights, but Norwegian state-owned companies are involved in breaches of these rights through investments abroad (Håskoll-Haugen, 2022). There are numerous examples of this double standard. However, Browning (2021) and Bjørkdahl (2021) claim that the well-established reputation allows Norway to withstand these disputes, although the double moral is regularly revealed. Still, not all actors let these hiccups pass. Norwegian and international NGOs attempt to expose Norway's hypocrisy and address these paradoxes.

## THE 'POLICY COHERENCE FOR DEVELOPMENT' AGENDA

Over the past two decades, efforts to address Norway's hypocrisy and incoherent policymaking have increased as part of the Policy Coherence for Development (PCD) agenda. I explain the background for this agenda to illuminate the momentum for demanding policy coherence, which potentially gave some policy actors a sense of meaningfulness whilst working for PCD initiatives. As mentioned in the introduction, PCD is a concept for alternative ways of enhancing development assistance by implementing cross-sectoral cooperation. In this thesis, I build on the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) definition from 2001, utilised by several NGOs and researchers. They defined PCD as "the need to promote mutual reinforcing policy actions across government departments and agencies to achieve development objectives" (OECD, 2001, cited in Vormedal & Lunde, 2015, p. 7). The Norwegian government has long acknowledged the need for PCD (MFA, 2003). However, they presented few substantial initiatives until 2016, when the Christian Democratic Party launched

a PCD reform as they entered into government. In 2017, a multi-stakeholder Forum for Policy Coherence (RORG, 2018) was launched, as I will explore in chapter 5. After seeing that the Forum was somewhat unsuccessful, in the spring of 2022, a new multi-stakeholder forum for achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs) was launched, intended to continue the former Forum's work (Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2022).

NGOs have long expressed their disappointment with existing initiatives and their desire for more action on PCD (Forum for utvikling og miljø, Kirkens Nødhjelp, et al., 2019; Kirkens Nødhjelp, 2020; Vormedal & Lunde, 2015). An example is when the Norwegian youth NGO Spire launched a somewhat sarcastic campaign named "Typically Norwegian to be good?" (Spire, 2018). Utilising the slogan by Brundtland, they created a poster (see Figure 1) portraying a Norwegian fairy tale character with a superhero shirt, running away from fjord pollution and oil production to save the developing countries. Moreover, in 2018, the
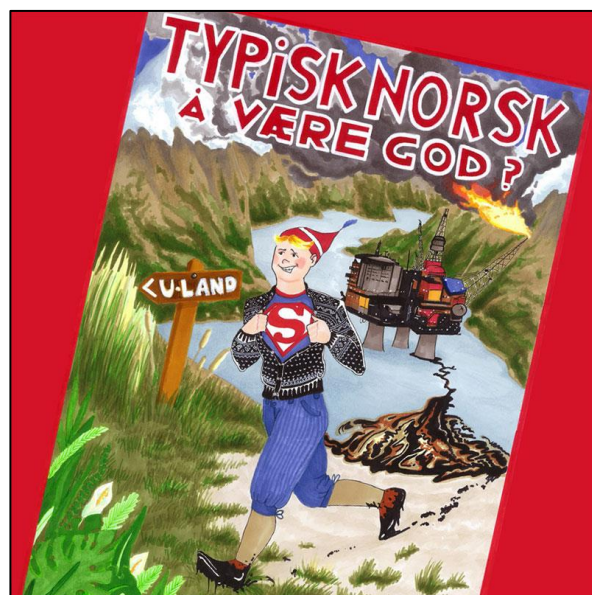


**Figure 1**: Poster from Spire's campaign: "Typisk norsk å være god?" (Fottland, 2018)

Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) evaluated the government's PCD efforts. Here, they pointed at several political incoherencies negatively affecting development objectives and confirmed the low amount of efforts to address these. Their evaluation also showed an alleged lack of "culture within the government of interfering in other ministries' policies and decisions beyond informal discussions and cooperation and consultations in inter-ministerial working groups and committees." (Stave et al., 2018, p. 36).

The MFA organisation has received blame for the difficulties with achieving PCD. Within MFA, two ministers are working for different target groups. Eggen (2018) writes that MFA must serve Norwegian interests. However, managing the funding and policy work on development aid within the same organisation that promotes Norway can engender steering of aid towards serving Norwegian interests instead aid recipients' interests (Eggen, 2018). Consequently, he argues that MFA must distinguish and create a balance between the objectives of the organisation MFA and the objectives of development aid. Several research participants point to the same dilemma. Moreover, in his ethnography of the ministry, Neumann (2012) found that bureaucratic knowledge production within MFA entails seeking out the opinion of

all parts of the ministry, making the aim of diplomatic text production to reach a consensus. I discuss the implications of such a culture in chapters 4 and 5.

## THE 'FOOD SYSTEMS' APPROACH

An emerging thematic focus has brought new opportunities for PCD, namely the 'food systems' approach (Brouwer et al., 2020). In addition to looking at PCD initiatives, this thesis focuses on efforts within food policies and this new systemic approach. Thus, I will elaborate shortly on its development to create a backdrop for my further analysis. As informed by the research participants, food security and agricultural development have long lived in the shadows of other focus areas such as education, health, and economic initiatives within development politics. However, over the recent years, many actors, public and private, have engaged more with food-related initiatives, both on the national and international stage. The relevance of food policy has permeated other sectors with the increased attention, and the need for increased policy coordination emerged.

On the 16th of October 2019, on World Food Day, I worked as an intern for the Norwegian delegation to FAO. Food security was high on the agenda within these spheres. However, a couple of days before the 16th, rumours spread. Something big was about to be launched. In the FAO building, I sensed that member state delegates were excited as they were rushing back and forth, whispering to each other, and making phone calls. They hoped that food security would now reach the global stage, aligned with climate, peace and other topics on the global agenda. We waited eagerly during the World Food Day ceremony, and the screen turned blue. The Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, appeared. He said: "Transforming food systems is crucial for delivering on all the SDGs. That is why I hope to convene a Food Systems Summit in 2021"[2]. Food Systems had now received their own High-Level Summit convened by the Secretary-General himself. Eagerly, the national delegations immediately started to plan how to influence the agenda to reflect their national policies. Indeed, this launch had repercussions also for the ministries and civil society sector back in Norway. From my former contacts in civil society, I learned that NGOs who already prioritised food security seized this opportunity with both hands to ensure Norway's commitment to food security.

With the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS), talk about "food systems" exploded, and the 'food systems' approach manifested in policymaking across the globe. A 'food systems'

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[2] The launch video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6i7x_V6WVaw

approach draws on multiple sectors and ministries relevant to food security (The Norwegian Government, 2019). In Norway, the government officially adopted the approach in 2019, when seven ministries launched the Action Plan for Sustainable Food Systems (The Norwegian Government, 2019). There are several definitions of food systems. The one referred to by MFA in the action plan on sustainable food systems defines that:

> A food system gathers all the elements (environment, people, inputs, processes, infrastructures, institutions, etc.) and activities that relate to the production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption of food, and the output of these activities, including socio-economic and environmental outcomes. (HLPE, 2014, p. 12)

Further strengthening the momentum for food security and food systems, Norway saw a governmental shift in 2021, the year of my fieldwork. The Minister of Agriculture and the Minister of Development were elected from the Centre Party, traditionally an agrarian political party in Norway. Before the election, the Strategy for Climate Adaptation, Prevention of Climate-related Disasters and Hunger control was launched in April, confirming the alleged importance of food systems, a document addressed in chapter 5. The current Minister of Development has further announced that the government will guarantee significant investments in food security (Zachrisen, 2022). Perhaps this can indicate ensured continuity for the food systems approach.

## TENSIONS AND MEANING IN THE POLICY WORLD OF SEEDS

As described in the introduction, it is necessary to find an angle from which one can study the policies surrounding food systems, and seed security is an ideal topic for teasing out tensions and paradoxes to understand how the actors react to them and find meaning. In the Norwegian context, several examples illustrate existing paradoxes. One example is how Norway's membership in the International Convention for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (also known as the UPOV Convention) stands in contrast to our demands on developing countries through EFTA trade agreements. Our demands can impede smallholder farmers' rights to save and use traditional seed varieties and maintain a diversity of plant genetic resources. At the same time, we worship these rights at home and defend them in international forums. I will further explain and discuss this paradox in chapter 6.

Multiple other paradoxes also exist between objectives in seed policies and other sectors, and considering the significant impact seeds have on smallholder farmers' livelihoods, culture and survival, and global food production, it is essential to understand the obstacles to seed diversity and sustainability. The presented paradox and the complex dynamics of the Norwegian policy

space for seeds open for an exploration of how key actors are manoeuvring such paradoxes and find meaning in their work. I have also emphasised internal tensions in their policy world to understand how the different actors seek meaning. This section will give some background information on global and national debates which affect the meaning-making of several research participants, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 6.

## Conservation types and global tensions

Global debates on the conservation and distribution of seeds create tensions and affect the meaning-making of actors working with seed policies in Norway, as illustrated in chapter 4. Central to the global controversies is the struggle between private actors wishing to control the intellectual property rights of seeds and small-scale farmers with few financial resources. Regimes of intellectual property rights allow multinational seed companies to control farmers' livelihoods and global food production (Peschard, 2021). Across the globe, many small-scale farmers obtain their seeds primarily from what Westengen (2020) terms "informal" channels; exchanges with neighbours, local fairs and local markets (Vásquez, 2017; Westengen, 2020). However, increasing pressure from private actors, expansion of industrial agriculture, and new legislation related to seed and intellectual property rights constitute threats to the preservation of traditional seed systems (Fridtjof Nansen Institute, 2020; Vásquez, 2017; Westengen, 2020). The accumulation of power within the commercial market keeps escalating (Westengen, 2020). This accumulation poses a considerable threat to the diversity of plant genetic resources as major agricultural companies sell crop varieties, inducing large-scale industrial monoculture into the agricultural sector (Bergius et al., 2017). This political landscape clearly affects policy discussions on seeds in Norway.

To explain the research participants' diverging interests and ways of finding meaning, I first need to spell out three main types of seed conservation: *ex-situ*, *on-farm*, and *in situ* conservation. These are concepts the research participants frequently referred to. Article 2 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (1992) explains that "*ex-situ* conservation means the conservation of components of biological diversity outside their natural habitats", typically carried out through gene banks or botanical gardens. *In-situ* conservation entails:

> The conservation of ecosystems and natural habitats and the maintenance and recovery of viable populations of species in their natural surroundings and, in the case of domesticated or cultivated species, in the surroundings where they have developed their distinctive properties. (Convention on Biological Diversity, 1992).

The types of conservation entail different forms of restoring biodiversity. *On-farm* conservation is embedded in *in-situ* yet relates to conservation on farms specifically and farmers' decisions (FAO et al., 2021). With *in-situ* conservation, biodiversity changes mainly following the surrounding environment, climate change, and evolutionary processes. *Ex-situ* contains more explicit conservation of diversity, e.g. in gene banks (FAO et al., 2021).

In addition to the different conservation types, farmers' rights constitute an important topic of interest for understanding how tensions occur in the policy world of seeds and thus frame actors' meaning-making. The struggle for farmers' rights is connected to the global accumulation of power in the hands of private companies, as described above. Andersen (2017) argues that farmers depend decisively on their rights to maintain their farms' genetic resources. Developing countries call for a more considerable emphasis on farmers' rights to enhance the protection of genetic diversity. However, there is resistance in many countries as the realisation of these rights could, to some extent, compromise breeders' intellectual property rights (Andersen, 2017).

I had the chance to observe the global controversies regarding farmers' rights during fieldwork on several occasions, in international conferences. Norway suggested including references to farmers' rights in the official language adopted by UN bodies, yet was met with objections from countries like the United States, Argentina and Canada. Tensions between the interests of plant breeders and farmers were also visible around a global seed conference in FAO in November 2021. More than 180 farmers' and Indigenous Peoples' organisations met the conference with indignation, claiming that the supposedly 'neutral' FAO was permeated by the seed industry's agenda (IPC, 2021). Following these debates, I have learned more about the rationales of Norwegian policy actors working within this field of controversy.

**The Norwegian seed policy context**

Norwegian development actors working with agriculture - both state and non-governmental - steadily express support for global initiatives to preserve and promote crop diversity. Relating to what Wohlforth et al. (2018) call a Norwegian 'policy of involvement', in 2002, foreign minister Jan Petersen stated that "Peace processes make us interesting ... We need a few products like that" (cited in Wohlforth et al., 2018, p. 540). Excellence in the work for protecting plant genetic resources is such a product. In 2011 former Minister of Agriculture and Food Lars Peder Brekk said: "We aim to be the best in the world when it comes to taking care of genetic resources" (cited in Andersen, 2012). Norway is currently a key donor and policy actor in protecting the diversity of plant genetic resources. Some policy actors claim that Norway has

credibility on the topic, as we are hosts of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault (Norwegian Ministry of Agriculture and Food, 2016). The Seed Vault receives crates of seeds from all across the globe, functioning as safety stock for local seed deposits. The Vault can help recreate valuable plant varieties for local seed banks that have lost their seed collections (Norwegian Ministry of Agriculture and Food, 2015). Concerning Norway's credibility and respect, some research participants also connect it to our two internationally renowned research institutions on seed systems, the Norwegian University of Life Sciences and the Fridtjof Nansens Institute, and the active role and leadership in international policy negotiations held by Norway. I find that these factors encourage and give meaning to bureaucrats and politicians to promote Norway's positions on seeds abroad.

According to the research participants, despite the international leadership and credibility on seed policies, seeds have not been high on the national agenda in Norway compared to other topics. However, recent events indicate that seed diversity and security now carry some more weight on the government's political agenda and within MFA. In 2020, former Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg hosted a meeting with the UN Secretary-General's advocacy group for the SDGs at Svalbard to discuss plant genetic diversity (The UN Secretary-General's group of SDG Advocates and Alumni, 2020). Further, In 2021, an alliance of actors gathered to promote a bottom-up approach to crop diversity and farmers' access internationally, initiated by MFA on the occasion of the UNFSS (MFA et al., 2021), which I will discuss further in chapter 4. The same year, we saw the governmental shift and new emphasis on food security. According to one of the research participants, the Minister of Development continuously mentions that seeds are of crucial importance. In February 2022, the Minister of Development and the Minister of Agriculture went to Svalbard Global Seed Vault to learn more and put genetic diversity on the agenda (The Norwegian Government, 2022). These factors point to increasing political attention given to seed policies, which can highly affect whether the policy actors' work is considered meaningful to them. However, according to research participants, recent political events such as the war in Ukraine have also threatened this political attention on seeds.

# Chapter 4: Fragile Harmony in the Policy World of Seeds

"In Norway, there is a unique agreement about the importance of seed diversity, from the farmer's field to the King's table". The Executive Director of the Norwegian Development Fund said this in a public webinar on the first day of my fieldwork in March 2021. Researching challenges with policy coherence, the remark piqued my interest. "Is it really this harmonious for all actors involved?" I asked myself. In the coming months, I experienced that actors involved in seed policies expressed that they have strong friendships and are all in agreement. They plan holidays together connected to international meetings, create projects together over meals at their houses, and "know each other so very well". I pondered about how it can be that non-governmental actors are this positive towards government representatives, as Norwegian NGOs and researchers express the significance of their role as 'watchdogs' (Nygaard, 2004; Storeng & de Bengy Puyvallée, 2018; Tørres, 2021). What was also interesting to me was how many repeatedly referred to this agreement and friendly atmosphere in both internal and external meetings.

As explained in chapter 3, a 'food systems' approach requires uniting groups with different thematic interests. I studied one of them, and in this chapter, I dive deeper into actors' work in the policy world of seeds, their internal disagreements and how they navigate these to strive to create coherent policies. I initiate my analysis this way because I find it essential to learn about policy actors' terms and motives for negotiating policies with other political spheres in a study of policy coherence. By terms, I refer to how they frame their policy world, the power relations within their world and with other sectors, and how they navigate internal tensions. I argue that the policy actors in the policy world of seeds seemingly see it necessary to cover up power imbalances and disagreements to maintain trust for upholding a 'team'. I explore how team constellations can alter their behaviour compared to independent behaviour. In addition, expressing harmony is necessary to maintain their external reputation and compete for resources and political attention with other policy sectors, leading them to uphold an image of coherence. Nevertheless, there are multiple tensions in their policy world, occurring because the actors hold different 'meanings' or purposes with their work. Thus, they defend a fragile harmony.

Discussing the term harmony, inspired by Müller (2013) and my data material, I understand the term as how elements of friendships, agreement and consensus-building are consolidated into

a discourse to keep open conflict over power and resources out of public attention. Müller (2013, p. 2) talks of a 'veil of harmony' over politics in international organisations and "the tension between the normative idealistic aspect of the organisation (…) and the political and economic interests that are played out there as well as the frustrations and the impetus for change that the actors in these organisations experience." There is similar friction in the policy world of seeds between their normative idealistic ideas of defending farmers' rights and seed diversity and their internal tensions coming from their diverging meanings. My analysis joins the ranks of new anthropological analyses pointing to the increasing use of harmonised discourses in policymaking of international organisations and Western countries and the search for what is underneath the 'veil' (Cowan, 2013; Larsen, 2013; Müller, 2013; Neumann, 2012; Shore & Wright, 2011).

To structure my analysis, I deconstruct a policy process on seeds to understand why the policy actors find meaning in upholding harmonious discourses when they possess opposing interests and meaning-making processes. I look at two artefacts of policymaking, documents and meetings, to tease out tensions, power relations and meaning. I have deliberately focused on tensions, as they stand in contrast to harmony and can illuminate what the 'veil' of harmony is covering for and why they need to uphold it. I also wished to examine tensions to illustrate policy processes' complexity and unpredictable nature, as Shore and Wright (2011) highlighted. Power inequalities and diverging meaning-making constituted central elements of study in seeking out the tensions of the policy world.

## DECONSTRUCTING THE SEED INITIATIVE
Before engaging specifically with the meaning-making processes of the research participants, I find it necessary to briefly explain the concerned policy proposal and the surrounding documents and meetings. This way, I aim to show the difference between the proposal's content, which shows harmony and agreement, and the policy document as an 'actant' (Latour, 2005), having a complex social life, engendering disagreements and confusion as it travels and translates into new contexts. Policy documents are also central in creating policy worlds, as Shore and Wright (2011) underscored. Further, as mentioned in chapter 2, meetings function as arenas moving beyond representing perspectives within documents to allow complexities to materialise that are not reducible to the written reports (Brown et al., 2017).

The activities around the Norwegian proposal on seeds sent to the UN Food Systems Summit 2021 (UNFSS) became central in my study of the policy world on seed systems. The proposal came about when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) decided to create a "game-changing

solution"[3] for the UNFSS related to food security. According to a bureaucrat I spoke to, they started brainstorming with "the people we usually talk to", meaning the reference group for the action plan for sustainable food systems, a group examined in chapter 5. MFA organized a meeting where several people mentioned seed security as a potential topic.

Subsequently, MFA invited all interested group members to a new group focused on this proposal. They also invited the farmers' unions and some researchers outside the reference group. The seed initiative group became a constellation of three bureaucrats from two ministries and one underlying agency, three NGO representatives, a representative from a farmers' union, and three researchers from the Fridtjof Nansen Institute and the Norwegian University of Life Sciences. Politicians were oriented about Norwegian activities around the UNFSS but seemingly not involved in details around the seed initiative. Politicians further mentioned the initiatives with a few sentences in speeches here and there, yet bureaucrats in the seed initiative group developed these speaking points.

**The travelling concept note**
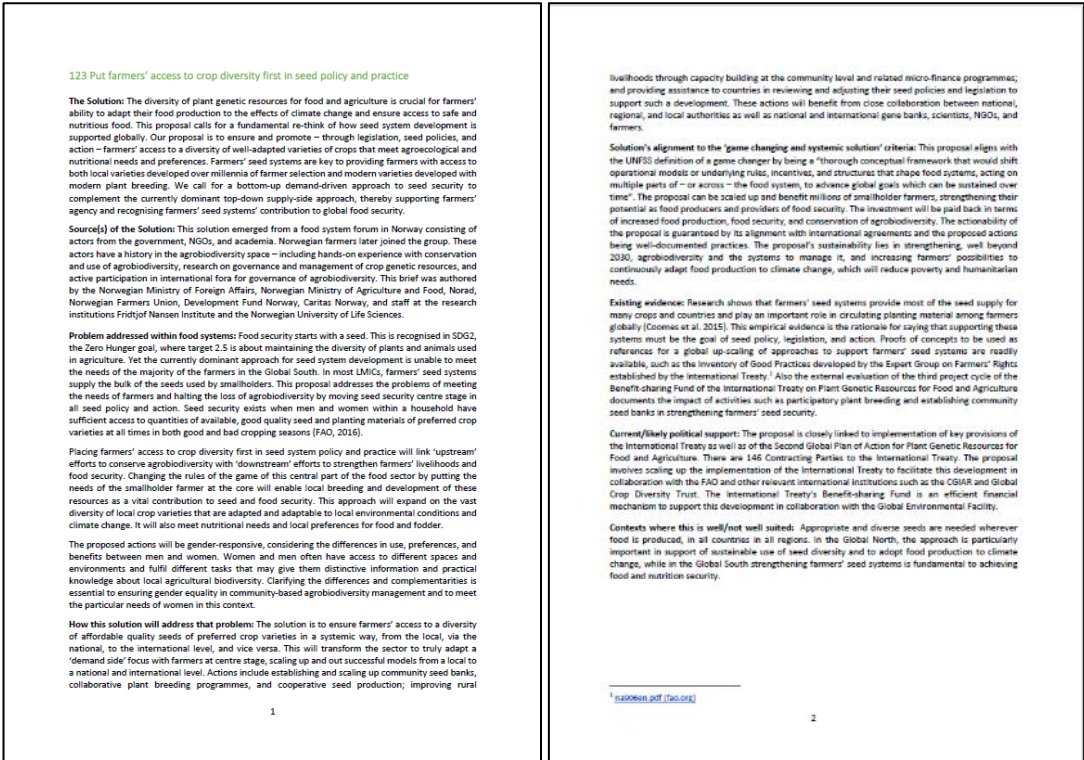


**Figure 2:** The concept note for the game changing solution "Put farmers' access to crop diversity first in seed policy and practice" (MFA et al., 2021)

MFA initiated the seed initiative group to create a new policy process, yet more concretely to produce a concept note for a 'game-changing solution' for the UNFSS. The game-changing

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[3] See https://foodsystems.community/game-changing-propositions-solution-clusters/ for more information.

solutions were to create 'a menu of possible actions' for transforming food systems (UN Food Systems Summit, 2021). The document is a two-page note with a standard document layout (see Figure 2), titled "Put farmers' access to crop diversity first in seed policy and practice". It was sent to the UNFSS Secretariat together with around 2,200 other submissions from across the globe. The document is available digitally on the Norwegian government's and the UNFSS' web pages. A section from the document summarizing the main objective and approach of the proposal reads as follows:

> This proposal calls for a fundamental re-think of how seed system development is supported globally. Our proposal is to ensure and promote – through legislation, seed policies, and action – farmers' access to a diversity of well-adapted varieties of crops that meet agroecological and nutritional needs and preferences. (…) We call for a bottom-up demand-driven approach to seed security to complement the currently dominant top-down supply-side approach, thereby supporting farmers' agency and recognising farmers' seed systems' contribution to global food security. (MFA et al., 2021, p. 1)

Based on conversations with research participants, there was little clarity coming from the Summit secretariat on how game-changing solutions would be utilized after the Summit and who held responsibility for their implementation. However, the Norwegian actors met regularly and decided to work with the initiative beyond the Summit.

Shore and Wright (2011) accentuate how people in different contexts concurrently speak for the same policies, which is also the case for this policy document. As mentioned in chapter 2, tracing the travel of the document and its translation has revealed tensions within the group. The concept note has travelled to the sphere of NGOs, being praised as a radical proposal (GMO-nettverket, 2021). I also observed its travel to FAO, and I saw it presented to the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV). After the Food Systems Summit, some group members shared the concept note with external parties to initiate collaboration. To their surprise, this sharing turned out to be problematic for other members. Its travel engendered new meaning connected to the document. One of the research participants expressed how she considered the document to exist strictly in the context of the Summit and saw risks with its continued use:

> I find it problematic to present this note to represent the group's positions. It was produced in a specific context, and it has received critical feedback from several actors. Going further without updating the document according to this criticism would be wrong. The document has lived its lifetime; we can either update it or put it to rest.

The research participant addresses that the document has 'lived', and I draw lines to Shore (2010, p. 604) and his discussion on Bruno Latour, seeing policy documents as "actants" and "objects that have a degree of agency and often very complex social lives". These complex social lives are augmented when various people in different contexts simultaneously represent the document. They create new relations around the policy document with the receivers of its presentation, and new people can connect different meanings to the initiative than the policy creators.

As elaborated in chapter 2, Asdal and Reinertsen (2020) are concerned with where the documents move, yet also 'what' they move. When studying the concept note's travel, I consider the concept note to represent the harmony and agreement between the range of actors on the need for a radical change of seed systems, going against the opinions of many other stakeholders and countries. Here, I refer to the global controversies explained in chapter 3. By bringing the note into international forums, the actors present themselves as a group and what they stand for. This vision of the group identity and their alleged point of view also travel between contexts, with unpredictable consequences. The objection above to the document's travel was one of the signs of cracks in the group's harmony.

### *A tool for serving different interests*
To expose the meaning held by the actors and the power relations between them, I found it relevant to study *who* this document is a tool for (a point raised by Asdal & Reinertsen, 2020). First, I draw attention to cultural frames affecting the bureaucrats in the group. For most ministries, especially for MFA, their organisation's objective is to promote Norwegian interests (Eggen, 2018). Thus, the bureaucrats would arguably be interested in utilizing this document to strengthen the 'Norwegian policy of involvement' (see Wohlforth et al., 2018), as elaborated in chapter 3. As mentioned, the Minister of Agriculture and Food stated in 2011 that Norway's objective is to be the global expert in taking care of genetic resources (Andersen, 2012). Presenting a concept note for a proposal on seeds to the Summit could strengthen this image.

However, the bureaucrats' engagement with the concept note also shows individual agency and motivation beyond these cultural frames. In line with criticism of conventional policy approaches (see Ortner, 1997; Shore & Wright, 2011), Heyman (2004) warns against understanding bureaucracies as deterministic institutions of power. He underscores how bureaucrats establish interests and 'meanings' of their own, where the guides for their action can also come from constituencies outside the bureaucracy. Several research participants explained that seeds had been considered a 'niche' in food policy in Norway. Thus, when bureaucrats

present this proposal in external settings, it can be a tool for expressing their own perspectives, as politicians in Norway are yet to develop such a specific approach to seed policy. Some research participants informed me that politicians can state that seed security is essential, yet "it is too technical and advanced a topic for politicians to develop distinct opinions about it". The bureaucrats also voiced excitement about managing to secure a spot in the limelight around the UNFSS, as Norway did only send a few game-changing solutions. Thus, bureaucrats connected meaning to the concept note both concerning serving Norwegian foreign policy interests and making Norwegian policy more ambitious and putting seeds higher on the national agenda.

Engaged researchers and actors from NGOs in the seed initiative group also wished to utilize the concept note as a tool or a 'historic' document. These actors wanted to move the policy direction within the Norwegian policy world of seeds. In their work to transform the policy discourse on seeds, NGOs and researchers of the group planned to utilize the note to show the 'historic event' where Norwegian authorities stood behind and advocated for a proposal perceived as radical even by Norwegian NGOs (GMO-nettverket, 2021). In this way, they could use the document to hold the authorities accountable for following up on their proposal, which could move the policy direction.

When the concept note travelled, and the process of concretizing the initiative went further, multiple questions arose from some group members. They wondered how the concept note intervened in the policy world of seeds and whether it represented current Norwegian policies or not. As elaborated in the paragraph above, some actors wished to utilize this concept note to move the policy direction. However, this use of the document worried other members. They feared that the proposal would engender a significant change of political direction. A researcher interpreted the purpose of the concept note quite dramatically as a new direction for Norwegian seed policies and feared that all support for *ex-situ* conservation would evaporate, as this proposal focuses mainly on *in situ* and *on-farm* conservation. He had received similar questions from colleagues abroad and suggested that the document should no longer be used. Several bureaucrats assured him that this was not the case and that the document was just an expression of wishing to strengthen a neglected area of seed policies.

The questions from the group members made it seem like the policy document had been translated into different meanings, challenging the initial meaning the group members connected to the document. This aligns with Latour (2005, p. 39), who argues that documents function as mediators, entities that "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the

elements they are supposed to carry". The example also illustrates Shore and Wright's (2011) argument on how policies can acquire lives of their own with consequences beyond what the bureaucrats initially intended. In this case, the document was eventually interpreted by some to constitute a significant political change.

## The frames of the meetings

I will now turn my attention to the frames of the meetings to understand how they affect the policymaking process. In her interpretation of Geertz's definition of meaning, Ortner (1997) emphasises meaning as frames and guides for human feeling, intention and action. Thus, I find it relevant to study how the frames of the meetings can influence the discussions and outcomes of the group. Confirming the importance of analysing the frames, Schwartzman (1989, cited in Brenneis, 1991, p. 495) claims that "meetings are significant for what they are and what they entail, rather than what might be decided within them". Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, all seed initiative meetings took place virtually on Teams and happened approximately once a month. The presence of members differed between about ten and thirteen. The sessions lasted for two hours, yet it always seemed as if they needed to rush the discussions to end on time, managing to reach other meetings. This rush can indicate lively discussions and disagreements in the group.

However, in contrast to the lively discussions and display of disagreements in the group, I found that several factors contributed to creating a harmonious atmosphere. Many members sat at home, before walls with paintings or kitchens, and the choices of what was visible behind them seemed arbitrary. This lack of visual differentiation between participants perhaps strengthened the relaxed atmosphere. Moreover, group members sometimes attended the meeting whilst in the middle of a meal or brought their dog or child onto their lap, as visible in the picture. Despite the increased frequency of such events due to the pandemic and new home office routines, the interruptions from food, animals and children can say something about the level of trust between the participants and how comfortable they feel, as they did not care to maintain a formal structure. Further, some policy actors must wear formal clothes for their work, but still, all members were dressed relatively informal.

Schwartzman (1989, cited in Sherry, 1991) argues that when mundane activities and formal structures characterize meetings, this may originate from a hope to depict the meetings as guided by reason and rational procedures, despite their encompassment of relationship compromises and power struggles. Concerning the seed initiative group, I find that quite differently, the friendliness and informality visible through the frames of the meetings, in

addition to the many remarks on their tight friendships and broad agreement, can create an image of the meetings as harmonious, despite containing disagreements and power imbalances.

The informality characterizing the meetings was also visible through the circulation of documents around the meetings. Abram (2017) asserts that the circulation of documents before and after the meetings is crucial for preparing the participants with the necessary information, making the meeting purposeful, and organizing the meeting. During the first meetings, no agenda was sent out prior to the meeting. Further, there were no designations of note-takers, and the chairs of the meetings did not send any official minutes from the meetings. Perhaps, because of the informality, it did not seem necessary.

However, the participants can affect the presentation and interpretations of meeting outcomes by recording or editing the minutes. The lacking production of minutes created room for the interplay between power and creativity, as mentioned by Shore and Wright (2011). One of the non-state actors saw the lack of minutes as an opportunity. He sent out his own version of the minutes straight after the meeting, emphasising elements he wished to bring forth in the policy process. This text ended up being the only existing written summary, giving this actor some power of definition. He was not a bureaucrat or politician who could make official decisions on the policy direction or development of the initiative. However, he employed creativity to find every possible moment to guide the policy process in his desired direction.

This example illustrates interesting aspects of power. It shows that exercise of power is not only related to prominent political and economic influence. It can happen when actors see moments of opportunity, appearing by random chance and depending on the context. However, whether the bureaucrats picked up the policy suggestions differed. Often, the proposals were side-lined as relevant projects and initiatives better placed external to this group, perhaps due to the unresolved tensions, which I will elaborate on below.

I observed other examples of creativity exercised by non-state actors concerning alliance building and utilising ad-hoc informal meetings. Brown et al. (2017) ask how the internal workings of meetings relate to specific external contexts. From one meeting to another, it could happen that a new full-fledged proposal was on the table, coming from NGOs or researchers. It was evident that this was not developed within the meetings, as the content was new. I got to know that some proposals were developed over meals in participants' homes, during walks in the forest, or through phone calls between group members. Such happenings confirm the existence of tight relationships within the group, informality of the policy process, and the

importance of external contexts to the meetings. However, again the uptake of the proposals in the group varied. Evans (2017) displays how bureaucratic meetings act as instruments for limited forms of empowerment. Through these examples of minutes and informal encounters, I interpret that there are opportunities for creativity and potential for increased influence. Therefore, the process can seem meaningful for the participants. However, the power relations between actors may determine whether these opportunities can lead to something substantial.

## DISCOVERING THE CONTENT AND CAUSES OF INTERNAL TENSIONS

My analysis of the concept note and meetings has revealed some differences in meaning held by the various actors. The concept notes' travel engendered frustration and confusion for some who perceived that its meaning had changed. The meetings both contributed to maintaining the 'veil' of harmony and functioned as rooms for the interplay between power and creativity, liberating and constraining the actors' meaning-making processes. This section will examine the content and causes of tensions within the group's meetings and outside of the meetings in the policy world of seeds. I closely examine these tensions to understand the actors' meaning-making processes and how they differ. This insight can clarify why they find meaning in maintaining an image of harmony and agreement.

Although many actors have expressed that they are all in agreement, some admitted that the picture is more complicated through private interviews. A researcher told me about a broad agreement within the group, which she found sensational. However, later she nuanced it and stated that a few different opinions exist yet are of minor importance in the big scheme of things. "Academics always find something to point at", she said and continued stating that they have pretty significant differences in where they place their emphasis and which policy processes they find most important. A bureaucrat also stated, "You are entering a field filled with different emotions and sensitive areas".

### Conceptualizing seeds as resources

A significant difference in meaning-making within the policy world relates to their preferred conservation type for plant genetic resources and seeds, *ex situ* conservation and *in situ* or *on-farm* conservation. The tension can arise from differences in culturally constructed guides for their feelings, intentions and actions (as per the definition of meaning by Ortner, 1997). Therefore, this section elaborates on their rationales for endorsing one conservation type over another to understand why tensions occur and what guides their meaning-making processes.

As elaborated in chapter 3, research participants have throughout my fieldwork indicated that there are controversies concerning seed systems and the protection of plant genetic resources

on the global level. Here, I mentioned the scepticism from some countries towards *in situ* and *on-farm* conservation. However, scepticism towards the utility of *ex situ* conservation also exists regarding its ability to reach the farmer. A bureaucrat confirmed the insufficient attention to the farmer within gene banks. She said, "Most often, gene banks operate in isolation. They receive a seed and store it. It is almost like a museum".

### *Promoting social and cultural dimensions of seed diversity*
I first learned of the tensions concerning diverging preferences for conservation types when interviewing a researcher who also calls for more attention to the farmer. The researcher discussed how Norway has traditionally focused on *ex-situ* conservation, such as gene banks, yet has little emphasis on conservation through sustainable use in the farmers' fields. He then elaborated on why he believes that *in situ* and *on-farm* conservation is neglected:

> I believe that many people think it must be better for farmers to access the plant genetic resources available through gene banks. But local varieties as a platform for food security and development have been out of the limelight, so many people have not yet understood that connection.

When I attended a webinar on seeds with a panel of small-scale farmers, they also expressed strong opinions on the need for more *in-situ* conservation. I integrate these perspectives as farmers in Norway are actors influencing the policy world on seeds. They are consulted in public hearings in the Parliament, vocal through chronicles in newspapers and other media contributions, and represented with one participant in the seed initiative group. In this webinar, they did not hide their frustration. Seated on a wooden bench in the public baking house of the urban farm Losæter, the farmer Kjersti Hoff expressed annoyance regarding Norwegian priorities (Spire, 2021). Her remarks illustrate the existence of disagreements cracking the alleged harmony "from the farmer's field to the King's table". Kjersti started talking about Svalbard Global Seed Vault with grand hand gestures and a lighter, slightly ironic tone. She said, "Norway is so proud of this gene bank. Where you can find some old seeds, a sort of security", with emphasis on the word old. She removed her ironic tone of voice and expressed with frustration, "But the seeds are not being developed!". She also addressed the potential future dilemma that the gene bank was created to protect seeds in times of climate change yet faces the threat of melting permafrost, which will decrease its storage abilities.

Another farmer in the panel of small-scale farmers, Andrew McMillion, echoed Kjersti's perspectives, stating that *ex situ* conservation is good enough. However, we must adapt to our changing environments and focus more on reproduction. He claimed that Norwegian agriculture will suffer if we do not adapt our seeds. They both requested more funding from the state to

support *on-farm* conservation. I recognise that the opinions of these two farmers might not reflect the opinions of all Norwegian farmers and not all views of farmers in developing countries. As discussed in chapter 3, there are many controversies and different opinions around seed policies globally. Nevertheless, including the farmers' perspectives is helpful to understand the tensions in the policy world and the influences of Norwegian small-scale farmers, with their strong criticism of current domestic and international policies.

Karin, a research participant from an NGO, also challenged the *ex-situ* focus in the Norwegian government by explaining the complex realities of handing out seeds from a gene bank or from other sources to a farmer:

> You cannot just give the seeds to the farmer. You must guide them and explain what inputs are required. You must give them all knowledge necessary: When do these seeds need to be sowed? How do these seeds fit into the farmer's ecosystem? Can you store them for later?

The remarks from the researcher, the small-scale farmers, and Karin point to the importance of understanding how different actors conceptualize seeds as resources or what discourses are in use. Kjersti and Andrew both understand seeds as integral parts of their surrounding ecosystems. The researcher and Karin draw attention to its cultural elements, the former pointing to the value of local varieties, and Karin addresses the knowledge and experience required to utilize seeds. Several anthropologists studying seeds also underscore the importance of integrating social and cultural dimensions in the studies of seeds to expose seeds as resources with great value for social and cultural relations (Aistara, 2011; Balázs & Aistara, 2018; Patnaik, 2016). These actors seemingly find meaning in work for seed security and diversity by emphasizing the protection of peoples' cultures, social networks and local ecosystems.

### *Seeing seeds as economic resources*
Conversely, private corporations and international institutions can connect different meanings to their portrayal of seeds' value. These actors are increasingly allowed to triumph over public actors in seed management (Westengen, 2020), and their framings influence some actors within the Norwegian policy world of seeds. Li (2014b) looks at how resources are assembled for global investments. Her demonstration of the immense cultural work undertaken by commercial actors to prepare land for others' availability also applies to seeds and how they are used for crops. When major institutions such as the World Bank and FAO talk about crop yields and agricultural efficiency scales (e.g. FAO & World Bank, 2016), they reduce seeds to become economic resources, seemingly used solely to cover dietary needs. Thus, they render seeds' social and cultural values, such as maintaining social networks and food culture, invisible to

serve commercial interests. Demeritt (2001) also explains the phenomenon by addressing how the value and potential of resources are determined through what he calls 'statistical picturing', which discounts current uses, homogenises, and aggregates all types of a resource under a new label, adjusted for the desired usage. He claims that researchers and experts also contribute to these framings. Thus, the conceptualization of seeds by the experts of the seed initiative group can contribute significantly to the direction of the policymaking.

To illustrate how these discourses affect the framing of seeds, I wish to elaborate on 'improved seeds', which are typically considered superior to traditional ones. This conceptualization is, among other places, found within humanitarian seed interventions. Sperling and McGuire (2010) point to the problematic belief held by many seed aid practitioners that 'improved seed', namely modern varieties which are formally certified and developed by plant breeders, is considered superior to farmers' traditional varieties. Sperling and McGuire (2010) claim that the latter excels the modern varieties in certain areas. Critics consider the consequences of these beliefs to be that humanitarian aid actors rarely adapt seeds to the low-input conditions of recipients, as well as the farmers' local ecosystems, which can cause adverse long-term effects (Dalle & Westengen, 2020; Sperling, 2020; Sperling & McGuire, 2010). The conception of 'improved seeds' as superior further removes attention to seeds' cultural and social values.

These ideas that modern seeds are superior are also found among staff working with or within gene banks (Westengen et al., 2018). Such ideas possibly contribute to the tension between *in situ* and *ex-situ* conservation supporters within the policy world of seeds, as several actors manage Norwegian funds allocated to major international gene banks. In one of the meetings I attended, an invited representative from an international gene bank illustrated how 'improved seed' is still favoured within central gene banks. The representative explained that she works extensively within her organisation to ensure enough attention to farmers' access to diverse seeds. One of the group's researchers asked if there was tension within the organisation. The representative quickly responded, "Obviously, there is tension. Some people mean we need to diversify seed access. Some mean that only our developed material can enhance food diversity. I personally believe we need both.". This discussion of how resources are framed sheds light on a central tension in the policy world of seeds and significant differences in meaning-making processes among actors working with seeds. It is also relevant for understanding the complexity of creating coherence between different policy sectors, as policy actors can frame food and resources in a multiplicity of ways according to their interests.

## The reluctance to 'touch' politics

By examining tensions and meaning-making differences, I discovered another significant difference between the research participants, among both researchers and bureaucrats, namely their willingness to 'get involved in politics'. Connected to my discussion on the framing of resources, not all actors see the need to debate the choice of conservation type and express concerns about making the debate too political. The Norwegian researchers Westengen et al. (2018) question if there is a need to uphold a dichotomy between the conservation types. They argue that certain scholars and policy actors in the public debate take a political-economic stance on their work on conservation, linking *ex-situ* to corporate interests and *in-situ* to farmers' sovereignty. On the contrary, Westengen et al. (2018) claim that farmers have a significant demand for genetic resources stored in gene banks today.

Whether favouring one conservation type or arguing for moving beyond the dichotomy, several factors can contribute to maintaining these positions, among them researchers' diverging opinions on the role of academia and the role of politics in research. These opinions likely stem from a tradition in academia to separate research and politics. Such beliefs are present also in anthropological research, e.g. as discussed by Bourgois (1990) and Robben and Sluka (2012). Integrating researchers' relationships to politics is relevant for my analysis for several reasons. First, the diverging opinions on the role of politics created tensions in the group, revealing differences in meaning-making processes. Second, to understand the 'policy world' of seeds, I must, according to Shore and Wright (2011), integrate available research and discourses related to the topic and how they connect with other actors and elements. Confirming the importance of researchers' perspectives for my analysis, several research participants working in ministries claim Norway has a research-based approach to seed systems and plant genetic resources. Moreover, looking at the arguments of Demeritt (2001) on the 'statistical picturing' of resources, he also claims that researchers and experts contribute to this framing which actors from multiple constituencies might adopt.

Looking at the first attitude to political involvement, Westengen et al. (2018) claimed that several researchers and NGO actors take a political-economic stance on their work on conservation. Their statement can imply that they do not consider the role of researchers to involve engagement with politics. I also interviewed a researcher who was part of the seed initiative group and asked how she works with policy. She responded: "I do not agree that I work with policy". Along the same lines, a different researcher claimed in a webinar that "Several of the solutions presented in this field have the problem that they start with ideology",

arguing the importance of looking at 'objective facts'. Aiming for rationality and objectiveness are seemingly part of these researchers' meaning-making processes.

However, the notion of research as separated from politics and ideology has received criticism. Bourgois (1990) claimed that an epistemology of relativism and 'value-free science' in North America created apolitical orientations that hinder researchers from revealing human rights abuses. Another researcher from the seed initiative group also held a distinct position on the role of politics in research. He elaborated in an interview that "one must work with determination to see real impact". He followed the sentence with nervous laughter and stated that "I probably should not have said that", explaining that other researchers might find it inappropriate for researchers to talk about political impact.

One can find similar reluctance towards acknowledging political aspects of resources within bureaucracies. Increasingly, anthropologists studying policy talk of a "new global language" in governance systems containing harmonised discourses and apparent neutrality (Archetti, 1984; Müller, 2013; Neumann, 2012). They elaborate on notions of 'non-politicised' policies (Cowan, 2013) and 'post-political forms of regulation and governance' (Mouffe, 2005). Bureaucratic practices can also create models for social life that exclude other models by ignoring certain knowledge sets and presenting the ones in use as "technical" or "neutral" (Ferguson, 1994; Heyman, 2004; Müller, 2011). Larsen (2013) suggests that technicality and 'neutrality' dislocates thoughts of power and politics. Thus, processes of 'neutralisation' can be motivated by a wish to divert attention from economic inequalities and political struggles (Müller, 2013).

In addition to motives of obscuring power relations and struggles, diverging views on the role of the 'political' in research and policymaking can be linked to different schools of thought within academia, affecting the 'meaning' held by researchers and other actors working as bureaucrats or NGOs. The anthropologist Mary Douglas talks about *professional thought worlds*. She argues that experts are deeply affected by ideologies rooted in their education and training by utilising this concept. Scientific arguments and reasoning from their discipline affect how they interpret problems and approach issues (Douglas, 1987, cited in Emmelin & Kleven, 1999). During fieldwork, I observed that attention to farmers' rights, *on-farm* conservation and more radical political-economic attitudes are generally lower among those with an educational background in economics or natural sciences than those who have studied social sciences. However, differences in willingness to 'engage in policy' also exist within the same disciplines, as Bourgois (1990) discussed concerning anthropology.

*Professional thought worlds* can contribute to explaining the different ways members of the group find meaning and frame seeds in specific ways, including choosing to render them apolitical or not. They can be considered one of the culturally constructed models for human actions, intentions and feelings, part of Ortner's definition of meaning. My data material has shown that differences in *professional thought worlds* can create tensions, threatening the harmonious discourse surrounding their policy world.

## Colliding mandates creating differences in meaning-making

So far, I have elaborated on how tensions in the policy world occur from differences in actors' conceptualisation of resources and their willingness to 'touch' politics. I will now examine how differences in meaning can occur from colliding mandates between representatives of different constituencies. According to their respective roles, they face different constraints on their behaviour and contain diverging wishes of what to achieve with the seed initiative proposal. What is also noteworthy is that several actors of the policy world indirectly suggested that their interest is also to promote their institution to raise its reputation for potential allocation of resources. This motivation can create tension, creating a "competition" between actors working for the same cause. However, I focus mainly on other aspects of their roles and mandates. This section also discusses the complexity of these roles, as there is room for exercising creativity and agency even within institutionalised structures.

### *"Don't count your chickens before they're hatched"*

The framing of the seed initiative being the UN Food System Summit 2021 both allowed for the development of the initiative and put constraints on its potential. Many research participants expressed that they found the Summit confusing, inorganized and inaccessible and wished to bring the seed initiative forward, disregarding the Summit. The group's bureaucrats supported this wish. However, their reoccurring references to UNFSS structures made the engagement with the Summit remain a central part of their expressed objectives also after the Summit. On several occasions, they proudly referred to their visibility within the Summit structure, for example: "Our proposal is on the Summit webpage, Norway is fully committed, we have a mention of seeds in the Summit speech of Prime Minister Erna Solberg, and we are part of the coalition on Zero Hunger", and "The Pre-Summit offered opportunities for side-events, and we did it! We have communicated our proposal in the channels where it could be communicated". Based on these statements and conversations with bureaucrats, seemingly, they found meaning in 'ticking the boxes' of possibilities for engagement in the Summit, regardless of the results of this engagement. The seed proposal served as an essential tool to do so. This was also likely part of their job descriptions, which frame their work.

Another aspect affecting the bureaucrats' meaning-making was seemingly their need to avoid 'losing face'. In his discussion of bureaucratic documents governing immigrants, Bierschenk (2019, p. 116) states that the documents "serve as much to foster transparency as to avoid blame or responsibility for something or prevent oneself from experiencing negative (…) consequences". From my fieldwork, I recognize this fear of being accused of inability to deliver on political promises. A bureaucrat stated, "We did not count our chickens before they were hatched or scream loud like a lion about our work. This is positive.". Other bureaucrats agreed, one of them expressing how they were delighted with the results already achieved and how they had not promised anything they could not deliver:

> We have heard little since the Summit. We were thinking of creating a coalition, yet we were hesitant as there were 'muddy waters'; we did not understand what it entailed. With the game-changing solution on seeds, we kept a foot inside the structure without making too much commitment.

These motivations align well with Norway's "good state" brand, as discussed in chapter 3, where Norway as a state carries the ambition to hold a leading role in sustainability efforts. When branding is of higher priority than the actual results, it becomes precarious to promise too much without being sure that one can deliver. However, these cultural frames were not the only guides for the meaning-making processes of the groups' bureaucrats. As noted previously, Heyman (2004) underscores how bureaucrats also develop interests and meanings of their own, potentially going against the frames laid out for them; thus, not all bureaucrats follow the pattern I describe here. Nevertheless, the cautious engagement and the wish to 'tick the boxes', lead several bureaucrats' meaning to collide with that held by other actors of the seed initiative group, namely a desire for radical change. This contrast contributed to one of the central tensions in the policy process. I observed this tension when the member wrote his own minutes to promote his ambitious proposals, which the bureaucrats did not take further, and in many group discussions.

### *"We want action!"*
The desire for radical change or 'action' was a central part of the meaning-making processes of some participants in the policy world of seeds, coming from NGOs, farmers' organisations, and academia. As mentioned, seeds are considered a 'niche' in the political landscape of food systems. All members of the seed initiative group seemingly share a wish to put seeds on the food systems agenda. However, I learned that while some group members wished to put seeds on the agenda of food policy, others were more ambitious regarding changing the content of the Norwegian seed policy, also hoping to move the policy direction on the global level.

A strong passion for the topic seemingly drives these actors. In fact, for all the research participants, I argue that seeds' 'niche' position in food policy could entail that their primary motivation is their passion for the topic rather than other factors. If they wished to gain status, a remarkable career within ministries or NGOs, or gain substantial political attention, other topics related to food systems would likely be more relevant to pursue. Their passion and commitment to their work and the thematic field became apparent when I attempted to trace the genealogy of the initial idea for the seed proposal. Finding the originator for the idea proved difficult, as research participants told similar yet slightly different stories about how it came about. However, most told stories where they played a crucial part in, if not the creation of the initial idea, then the development of the proposal itself, and they showed excitement that this group was initiated. In my perception, the fact that most research participants claimed responsibility for developing the proposal shows signs of ownership and commitment.

Considering differences between non-state actors pursuing radical change and bureaucrats, I learned that the members wishing for radical change carry great passion but disregard other considerations related to the development of the seed initiative, such as available resources and Norway's commitments to the Summit. In contrast to bureaucrats following the Summit structure, they overlooked the Summit because of its incomprehensive processes and wished to take the seed initiative further regardless. A researcher stated that the seed initiative created a unique opportunity and momentum, which must be utilised for its potential. These actors also stated, "We all agree that we want to see action!". Regarding what 'action' entailed, they presented several proposals to the group, often containing programs of capacity building in developing countries to improve seed legislation or other development initiatives supporting small-scale farmers. The initiatives were met positively yet rarely brought further by the rest of the group. These proposals may exemplify what Müller (2011) calls 'tactical calculations'. When the frames for the work are set, considering power relations and lacking financial resources, actors continuously take advantage of occasions to convert them into chances for making an impact that may only be temporary.

However, non-state actors with high ambitions for radical change experienced visible success in one area without facing constraints. They contributed to the concept note and added language demanding a 'bottom-up' approach. A bureaucrat utilised this language in an official intervention at a UN conference on genetic resources. Subsequently, the European group at the conference adopted this language. Despite objections to the 'bottom up' approaches, it was adopted as agreed language by the conference, potentially creating new discourses in the

international sphere for genetic resources, which could travel into other contexts. This example illustrates the interplay between creativity and power and how political successes sometimes happen randomly and are not solely top-down processes.

## THE VITAL 'VEIL' OF HARMONY

Thus far, I have discussed existing tensions in the policy world coming from differences in meaning-making processes related to conceptualizations of seeds, the role of 'politics' in research and policymaking, and diverging mandates and power relations. This analysis has made evident that the differences in meaning make it challenging for the actors to unite their views and ambitions into one coherent policy process, all working for the same outcomes. However, as indicated previously, actors in the policy world publicly insist on the presence of agreement, perhaps constituting an attempt at creating a harmonious discourse around their policy world. Keeping the tensions in mind, I will now discuss why actors working with seeds find meaning in maintaining this image of harmony. I argue that several aspects of meaning can explain the need to uphold this notion of agreement.

First, Shore and Wright (2011) assert that policies can create social spaces. Without any specific reference to what a 'social space' is, I interpret this quality of policies to entail the creation of a social organisation, networks, or simply connecting people around policies. In Norwegian, several seed initiative group members referred to themselves as "*frøgjengen*", meaning the seed squad or seed crew. This strong sense of group identity became apparent when a member in 2022 suggested that the group's relevance was diminishing and that they should continue their work in their respective spheres outside of the group. On the contrary, other group members across constituencies expressed that they saw great value in continuing this forum. As several research participants also underscored that some of them have strong friendships, maintaining an alleged agreement can contribute to upholding their social organisation and give the members a sense of belonging.

Further, they benefit from sharing information; thus, it is valuable to maintain a friendly atmosphere. Taking the seed initiative group as an example, the bureaucrats could discuss Norwegian positions in international negotiations on seeds with 'independent' experts in the field, receive suggestions on policy designs and projects and update themselves on the latest research. Additionally, as discussed, bureaucrats can develop interests of their own which are more in line with the positions of other constituencies rather than their ministry (Heyman, 2004). Hence maintaining a close-knit group with non-state actors could strengthen these positions. Moreover, for NGO actors and researchers, the group provided them with a direct

channel for influencing the work of the ministries. Thus, the meetings also became tools for serving the members' individual interests.

Additionally, the concept note and meetings can serve as tools for different participants' meaning-making processes. However, these functions rely on an agreement to stand behind the concept note or continue with the meetings. If such an agreement is not in place, the documents and meetings no longer carry the same political weight, the aspect of *action* embedded in the document disappears, and one is left with their relevance as historical happenings (Asdal & Reinertsen, 2020). In her reflections on the local population in Northern Peru and external environmentalists uniting against a mining company, de la Cadena (2015) talks of an alliance with "common, yet not the same interest". She writes about how the coalition requires politics for *sameness*, which provokes disagreements internally according to the actors' different meaning-making, thus engendering a practice of politics *across divergence*. I find that this description captures the essence of agreement in the policy world of seeds, as the actors all are interested in depicting their work as cohesive yet with diverging motivations.

Discussing how team constructions can alter behaviour, Goffman (1992) states that public disagreements can hinder teams from reaching their objectives. He claims one should treat individual and team contexts differently, as teamwork depends on trust, for the team to avoid ruining their outward image. Work to maintain this trust can alter the behaviour of the members compared to their independent behaviour. Thus, the mutual dependency between the group actors can cover social and structural differences to create a sense of togetherness and avoid ruining the team's reputation (Goffman, 1992). This team behaviour can explain why research participants provided different, often more critical, information in private settings.

Another reason for maintaining the harmonious discourse is that the most vocal and radical participants are researchers and NGO actors; thus, their behaviour is somewhat constrained. They depend on politicians' and bureaucrats' resources and willingness. I have elaborated on examples of 'tactical calculations', the term suggested by Müller (2011) for cases where participants struggle to uphold a clear differentiation between themselves and the other, where these actors play with creativity to try to change the agenda, yet must refer to the frames outlined by the authorities. Conversely, the small-scale farmers Kjersti and Andrew freely voiced their frustration publicly. However, they are not participating in any 'team effort', as Goffman (1992) discussed, involving authorities. The small-scale farmers' union stands outside the seed initiative. Thus, they can uphold what Foucault calls a *counter-conduct,* as I have described in

chapter 2, referring to the "struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others" (Foucault et al., 2007).

Perhaps the most critical reason for depicting harmonious discourses is that they must stand together to get political attention, competing for resources and attention against other fields of food policy. As mentioned in chapter 3, research participants expressed that food security within development policy was considered a niche topic before the Christian Democratic Party gained the post of Minister of Development in 2019. Working with the more specific field of seeds, they have long ended up in a 'niche' within a 'niche'. Consequently, putting seeds on the agenda has been an essential part of the meaning-making process for many participants. They must stand together to manage so, as per the remarks of Goffman (1992) on the risks connected to showing public disagreements.

Additionally, I wish to reflect on a phrase that occurred in individual conversations with group members from several constituencies, namely that "seeds are not oil". They made this statement when discussing how seed policies are placed within the overall political sphere, indicating that politicians are less hands-on as this is a sector of low economic interest. The focus on economic interest refers to a discussion of how neoliberalism affects the actors, which I will undertake in chapter 6. However, this statement can cover more aspects than the low economic interest. "Seeds are not oil" can also point to seeds' cultural and social relations, distinctly different from those connected to oil. Several anthropologists illustrate how social networks are intrinsically linked to seed distribution and management (Aistara, 2011; Balázs & Aistara, 2018; Fischer et al., 2021; Patnaik, 2016). Gutiérrez Escobar (2016, p. 4) further discusses the value of seeds by arguing that for farmers and several Indigenous Peoples' communities, "identity-making processes become embodied in –and through– non-human beings, such as seeds". The research participants' passion for lifting these perspectives and the importance of seeds for people worldwide can make it meaningful and worthwhile to cover up and stay quiet about internal disagreements.

Lastly, I wish to consider the depiction of harmony as a cultural trait of political life in Norway. Comparing politics in Norway and Argentina, Archetti (1984) suggests that Norwegians interpret power based on precise, observable results from concrete and visible actions. He claims that this renders power exercise in Norway an objective process, where the actors are factual and rational, compared to Latin America, where feelings and passion are intrinsic to policy processes. Archetti (1984) argues that by seeing policy processes this way, Norwegians conceive that decisions are of general consensus. He further states that actors involved in policy

processes whose views were defeated choose to suppress their disagreements once decisions are made, to be interpreted as equal and participating teammates who put decisions into action. This resembles Müller's (2011) concept of 'tactical calculations'.

Such behaviour results in resignation over opportunities to achieve desired results or establish alternative regimes. In contrast, Archetti claims that such a consensus mechanism does not exist in Latin America, and actors disagreeing with political decisions do not hesitate to show resistance or imagine alternative regimes (Archetti, 1984). This difference links to the policy actors' ability to uphold *counter-conduct* (Foucault et al., 2007), as discussed above. Norwegians are seemingly interested in staying involved in the process, and it is therefore challenging to distance themselves from the governors. The ethnography of the Norwegian MFA by Neumann (2012) shows similar tendencies of consensus culture characterising Norwegian political life. In the following excerpt, he illustrates how it is an essential element of bureaucratic knowledge production to reach an agreement and conceal any potential conflicts:

> When diplomats are in charge of producing a text, they seek out the opinion of each and every part of the foreign ministry that may conceivably have, or may be expected to gain, an interest in the matter at hand. As a result, the writing up of a diplomatic text is not primarily a question of communicating a certain point of view to the outside world, or producing a tight analysis. It is rather an exercise in consensus building. One effect of this mode of knowledge production is that texts emanating from a foreign ministry are all, at least ideally, in the same voice. Another effect is that, when left to their own devices, diplomats will tend to reproduce extant knowledge rather than produce something new. (Neumann, 2012, p. 7)

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

I started this chapter by claiming that the actors in the policy world of seeds maintain a harmonious discourse and communicate an image of agreement. However, throughout this chapter, I have elaborated on tensions arising from differences in meaning-making, illustrating the difficulty of developing coherent policy processes. These tensions relate to the conceptualisation of resources, opinions on whether to engage with ideology or politics in research and policymaking and diverging mandates and power relations. Further, different *professional thought worlds* can make it challenging to unify opinions. Through looking at the activities surrounding documents and meetings, it is evident that there is room for creativity and influence for all policy actors. Nevertheless, unequal power relations and available resources often constrain them. The participants' diverging meaning-making in a policy process can drive the project in widely different directions, with unintended and surprising consequences.

However, despite differences in meaning-making, the expression of harmony is meaningful for all actors. The harmony is vital for maintaining the necessary trust for upholding a 'team' and the external reputation, competing for resources and political attention with other development policy topics. Their friendships and social relations can also motivate the harmonious discourse, as their group membership can provide 'meaning' through a feeling of affiliation. Moreover, all members carry a great passion for moving this agenda forward. Communicating agreement and harmony thus functions as a tool for making meaning out of their work, despite working in an environment filled with tensions. Bringing these perspectives into the rest of the thesis, when looking at attempts to coordinate work on food systems, I will give attention to power relations between different constituencies and political topics. Chapter 6 also looks at how these policy actors react when more powerful political interests threaten the work of their 'niche' sector.

# Chapter 5: Policy Fetishism and Creativity in the Work for Coherence

As elaborated in the introduction, this thesis focuses on how actors navigate paradoxes in two ways: how policy actors deal with the paradoxes presented to them and how some actors actively take action to work for policy coherence. This chapter will look at the latter and how they find meaning in their work for policy coherence. As mentioned, arguments by Niels Louwaars (2007) inspired this thesis. Expanding on seed systems, he points to the tensions within sectors, as discussed in the previous chapter, and between sectors. He further outlines an "obvious" solution:

> Disconnections are identified among different stakeholders within a dossier, between dossiers (agriculture, trade, environment) and between different levels (local, national, international). The obvious solution lies in creating institutional mechanisms that increase communication among government departments and different levels of government, increasing opportunities for better policy congruence. (Louwaars, 2007, p. 7)

Louwaars does not stand alone. Inter-departmental mechanisms are often suggested as solutions for policy coherence (Skaugvoll Foss, 2021, in Forum for utvikling og miljø, 2021c; Stave et al., 2018; Vormedal & Lunde, 2015). For two decades, the Norwegian parliament and civil society have worked to establish institutional arrangements to ensure policy congruence, although with limited success. Within development politics, as mentioned previously, the work is popularly framed under 'Policy Coherence for Development' (PCD). However, with the growing interest in systemic approaches to food, there are new attempts at policy coordination. This chapter elaborates on the experiences of actors working to coordinate food policies across ministries and sectors. I also bring in experiences from actors who have engaged with overarching PCD efforts. As in the previous chapter, I utilise documents and meetings as vantage points to understand power dynamics and differences in meaning between policy actors from distinct constituencies. With my analysis, I hope to illuminate how initiatives for policy coherence create meaning, meaninglessness and spaces affecting the agency of the policy actors.

In 2016, the government answered civil society's demands for PCD reform, among other means, by establishing a multi-stakeholder forum to discuss dilemmas in development policy. As I will describe in chapter 6, some actors feel indifference towards the existence of policy

incoherence, while other actors feel frustration and passion for changing and enhancing the PCD agenda. Many other interests were perhaps also present in this Forum. As there are various and sometimes conflicting meaning-making processes, I will look at how the work for policy coherence took place and discuss whose interests the implemented policies for PCD promoted.

## THE FORUM FOR POLICY COHERENCE

The Forum for Policy Coherence was created in 2018, consisting of representatives from various ministries, civil society, academia and the private sector (MFA, 2018). The Minister of Development appointed the State Secretary from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to chair the meetings. In a press release, he communicated the intended outcomes of the Forum; to create more awareness of how different Norwegian policy sectors affect development objectives and to provide input to and discuss the annual reports to the parliament on PCD (MFA, 2018). The MFA sent these reports as attachments to their proposition in the State Budget. As mentioned in the introduction, as a representative for the Norwegian Children and Youth Council, I attended three meetings of the Forum.



**Figure 3:** The first meeting of the Forum for Policy Coherence in 2018, with the State Secretary for Development, chairing the meeting, to the right (MFA, 2018).

To grasp what was going on in the Forum and how the meaning-making processes played out, I will first examine the frames around the meetings and their effects. As mentioned in chapter 4, Schwartzman (1989, cited in Brenneis, 1991, p. 495) states that "meetings are significant for what they are and what they entail, rather than for what might be decided within them". As

visible from Figure 3, and as I know from my own experiences, participants wore formal clothing. They wore suits, blazers, and blouses, sitting in a room full of natural light in the building of MFA. The State Secretary for Development sat at the end of the table. During the first meeting, the State Secretary for Climate also attended to show that his ministry prioritised this work. However, he did not attend the next meetings. Brown et al. (2017, p. 15) state that "meetings are full of capacity; at least this is what participants often wish to claim.". I remember that these formal frames made the meetings seem important. The clothing, the large number of participants, and the presence of political leadership were all factors that possibly built expectations among the participants.

Considering the many paradoxes in policymaking, coordinating policies across political sectors is challenging. The organisation of the meetings can indicate whether the organisers allowed such work to happen. The MFA provided a written agenda prior to each meeting of the Forum. Abram (2017) claims that the exchange of documents before the meetings is crucial for making a meeting purposeful and for the very organisation of the meeting. In turn, the structure of meetings can be vital for the outcomes (Brown et al., 2017). I would argue that the routine of providing a written agenda in good time before the meeting reinforced the formality framing the meetings. However, a research participant said that agenda points were often limited to a round of introductions, inputs regarding theme for the annual report, and information from the ministries on ongoing events. Brown et al. (2017, p. 14) uphold that with meetings, "multiplicity (e.g., of people, perspectives, knowledge) is their point of departure, singularity (e.g., in the form of objective agreement) is often their achieved outcome.". Multiplicity constituted the Forum's point of departure through the range of opinions among stakeholders; however, providing inputs is not an endeavour requiring agreement. Actors can voice their concerns, to which the MFA can respond that these concerns are noted. Consequently, the agenda did not necessarily lead the meetings toward seeking agreement.

Consequently, the discussions, actions, and outcomes of the PCD Forum did not meet the expectations held by some research participants. During fieldwork, I met a representative from civil society, Finn, who participated in the Forum until its closure. We sat down with his colleague. Finn explained that the civil society representatives, in total three people, were the only ones engaging in debate besides the State Secretary who chaired the meeting. Thus, Finn felt that there was little activity in the meetings. When I attended the Forum prior to Finn's participation, I experienced little debate on matters other than the annual report's theme. Finn confirmed this observation and explained that after the Government published an annual report

for PCD containing little mention of political dilemmas, they received much criticism from civil society. Finn said the Forum was closed after the report launch to respond to the criticism.

As elaborated, the meeting frames possibly built expectations, and civil society actors also communicated these expectations in the media (see Forum for utvikling og miljø, 2018; Sivertsen, 2018). As mentioned in chapters 2 and 4, Schwartzman (1989, cited in Sherry, 1991) argues that formal structures in meetings may originate from a hope to depict the meetings as discussions guided by reason and rational procedures. However, they encompass compromises of relationships and power struggles. The formal frames around the meetings possibly helped cover the lack of discussions and the power inequalities of the group.

The Forum was supposedly an answer to demands for action on PCD from civil society. The State Secretary expressed objectives for the Forum, one on creating awareness, an objective which is difficult to measure or observe, and one concrete objective regarding providing input to and discussing the annual reports. Thus, he organised the meetings around this latter goal. There is often an interdependence between documents and meetings (Brown et al., 2017). I consider the preparatory documents and the subsequent organisation of the meetings to have shaped the Forum as a space primarily functioning for producing other documents, namely the annual reports to the State Budget. This purpose relates to my discussion in chapter 4 on bureaucrats' meaning-making connected to "ticking the box" of their job description.

When I spoke to Finn and his colleague about the Forum, they exchanged glances and laughed while rolling their eyes, giving me an impression that they had written off the PCD Forum as anything to take seriously. However, they still put effort and energy into demanding more enhanced work for PCD. Gershon (2007, cited in Engelke & Tomlinson, 2007, p. 18) asserts that something "meaningless" is "so understood by virtue of its position within a meaningful system". If following this argument, the actors' perceptions of the Forum as pointless illustrate the civil society actors' strong initial engagement and commitment to the PCD agenda and how they find meaning in this work.

Moreover, the 'meaning' held by Finn and his colleague could connect to a need to convince other civil society actors of the necessity of working for PCD, to ensure that actors in civil society maintain the political pressure on this challenge. As briefly mentioned in the introduction and explored in chapter 6, not all policy actors acknowledge the premise of PCD. They see conflicts and paradoxes as inherent to policymaking. Finn further explained that work with 'policy coherence' is perceived as "nerdy" by some NGOs. Other organisations work with

paradoxes between political sectors yet avoid framing it as PCD. As mentioned in chapter 2, Shore and Wright (2011) state that policies create new webs of meaning. As some did not see the relevance of working for PCD, and the Forum faded out, one can question what happened with the meaning held by Finn and other actors connected to 'policy coherence'. The possible disappearance of this 'web of meaning' could drive their motivation to continue working with PCD, even though the Forum disappointed them.

## NEW OPPORTUNITIES WITH THE 'FOOD SYSTEMS' APPROACH

The PCD forum closed, but the rise of a 'food systems' approach in Norway contains new attempts to unite political sectors for PCD within food politics. In Norway, the approach manifested itself in official policy in 2019 with the Action Plan for Sustainable Food Systems (Tankesmien Agenda & Forum for utvikling og miljø, 2020; The Norwegian Government, 2019). This action plan has been the most frequently mentioned document in conversations and events during my fieldwork. As mentioned, Shore and Wright (2011) claim that policies can create social spaces and that their language can create new discourses and webs of meaning. Regarding social spaces or social organisations, as I discussed in chapter 4, this document gathered the actors working on food security and related topics in Norway into what they called a reference group for the action plan. The document has also introduced a "systems approach" to food, containing a language that many policy actors have adopted. As done in chapter 4, by studying the documents introducing and developing the food systems approach, I attempt to identify relevant policy actors' behaviours, perceptions, and meanings.

### The export product

When the action plan was just released, I worked as an intern at the Norwegian Mission to the United Nations Agencies in Rome. My colleagues and I walked from meeting to meeting to advertise the action plan to member states and UN agencies. Whenever representatives from the MFA in Oslo travelled to Rome, they would ensure we received numerous physical copies to hand out to other member states and the UN agencies. The pride and alleged importance of the document was also prevalent during fieldwork in 2021. In a webinar I attended about Norway's contributions to the three UN summits held in 2021, the MFA expressed that this action plan shows Norway's experience in cross-sectorial cooperation, and we have a responsibility to share this experience with the world (Utviklingsfondet et al., 2021). The State Secretary for Development attended the same webinar, arguing that the action plan is ground-breaking in an international context as a tool for society to understand food systems holistically.

The materiality of the document has implications for its function and distribution in international contexts. The printed version of the action plan played a crucial role in raising awareness of the plan in international meetings and as a product to hand out in diplomatic settings. Norwegian diplomats gave the printed document to diplomatic partners as helpful information or policy inspiration. The action plan's translation into English confirms the asserted international importance. However, most actors in the policy world can primarily access the document digitally on the Norwegian government's webpage. The digital format also facilitates international distribution if we look at aspects of time and the travel of documents. Geographer David Harvey (1989, cited in Asdal & Reinertsen, 2020) claims that "time-space compression" characterises the postmodern globalised society. The documents travel across the world in a second, making them available to people across countries and across time. This momentaneous travel allows for the use of the document as more than a plan for guiding Norwegian politics.

The extensive efforts to promote the action plan in international contexts contribute to the Norwegian "policy of involvement" (Wohlforth et al., 2018), as discussed in chapter 3. This contribution relates to 'what' documents move on their travel (Asdal & Reinertsen, 2020) and what work a policy does (Shore & Wright, 2011). The bureaucrats' and politicians' statements on the action plan as ground-breaking in an international context, and "the fact that we have a responsibility to share this experience with the world" aligns well with the Norwegian 'good state' brand and the wish to promote Norway as a leader in sustainability efforts. The action plan can be considered part of active branding strategies for "being seen to be doing good" (Browning, 2021). These elements are important cultural frames, affecting the 'meaning' held by bureaucrats and politicians, which can guide their actions, such as the choices to actively promote the policy in various contexts.

Bureaucrats and politicians referred to how the action plan shows Norway's tradition for cross-sectoral cooperation on multiple occasions. These statements can be seen as work to strengthen the branding of Norway, yet what does this tradition of cross-sectorial cooperation entail? They held multiple meetings to develop the action plan. As stated previously, Brown et al. (2017, p. 14) claim that with regards to meetings, "multiplicity is often their point of departure, singularity is often their achieved outcome.". In conversation with the bureaucrat Conrad from one of the ministries involved in the plan, I learned of the dramatic negotiations to reach an agreement or a 'coherent approach'. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes recaps their process to reach coherency:

> Conrad greeted me with a big smile, and then we walked at a fast pace straight to a café of his choice. During our coffee meeting, he elaborated on many elements of the process behind the action plan. He stated that there was considerable interest among other ministries. Because other ministries also worked with food from an international perspective, five departments were included in creating the plan. They had intense discussions, as the ministries often enter negotiations with distinctive viewpoints and priorities, he explained, raising his eyebrows to underscore the difficulty of uniting stands. However, Conrad underscored that the different ministries needed to be involved to ensure that the action plan followed a holistic and coherent approach.

This description of the policy process focuses merely on the pathway towards a finalised policy. Hence, to further understand what work the policy does (Shore & Wright, 2011), I will integrate more excerpts from our conversation. In the following excerpt, Conrad reinforces the notion of the action plan as a product to which bureaucrats connect great pride by showing its role in speeches and international contexts and a product used to advertise Norway's positions:

> I asked him how the plan has been used since its release. "When it comes to politics, we see…". I stopped him mid-sentence and asked what he meant by 'politics' in this context. He explained that the document functions as a roadmap of the political stands on these topics, essential for the Norwegian development agency (NORAD) and abroad embassies in their meetings with partners to promote Norwegian policy stands. Further, politicians use it in speeches and international events. Conrad continued, stating that it has further been displayed as an example worthy of emulation by other countries and a basis for Norway's engagement in the UN Food Systems Summit 2021.

From our conversation, I also learned of the fragility of policy documents, in this context, seen as effects of governmental shifts:

> We met only a few days after the new government took office. Before I managed to ask any questions, Conrad shared about the effects of the recent governmental shift. He explained that one of the effects was the uncertainty about what will happen with the central governing documents, such as the action plan for sustainable food systems. Many people had put great efforts into developing this plan after the parliament requested it in 2018. "It can perhaps be a bit frustrating, yet it is the way things are", he said casually, referring to the uncertainty of the document's continued use, asserting that as bureaucrats, they must follow the current government's wishes; hence there is nothing they can do.

This last excerpt displays a complexity embedded in bureaucrats' roles. Above, I elaborated on the pride that several bureaucrats allegedly held in this plan. In this final passage, Conrad addressed the hard work being put into its development. The pride, sense of ownership and efforts can give bureaucrats meaning and lead them to develop individual interests (Heyman, 2004). In this sense, they can also function as political actors internally in their organisation. As elaborated in chapters 2 and 4, Asdal and Reinertsen (2020) point at documents as having

relational qualities. Here, I understand that the bureaucrats have developed a connection to the document based on their efforts and strive to navigate complexities across political sectors.

A different bureaucrat confirmed their 'meaning' connected to the plan. I asked him whether the different ministries had used the plan actively. He said he felt disappointed in 2019, after the launch, when he heard back from his colleagues who attended the international launch at a conference abroad. The Minister of Development and the Minister of Climate and Environment gave speeches at different side events. Despite having expressed commitment to the plan and representing a signatory ministry, the Minister of Climate and Environment did not mention the action plan. At the same time as it was being launched in another room at the same conference. The bureaucrat suggested it could be because of different priorities in the Ministry of Climate and Environment, but he said he was unsure and sounded a little bothered.

However, illustrating the complexity of their role, contrary to the meaning and relational qualities connected to the document, rooted in the job description of a bureaucrat is the obedience to politics (Heyman, 2004). This obedience is illustrated in the quote by Conrad about potentially having to throw away projects they long had worked on because of a governmental shift. By stating that "it is the way things are", Conrad still accepts his role and shows some indifference toward the risk of the neglect of the action plan.

### "Where is the *action* in the action plan?"

Considering one of the bureaucrats' disappointment, I ask again what the Norwegian tradition for cross-sectorial cooperation entails. Thus far, seemingly, it solely connects to the development of the action plan. However, I found more perspectives when studying the document's travel to NGOs. Their reactions are central components of the concerned policy world. NGOs welcomed the initiative to develop the plan for its cross-sectorial approach (Tankesmien Agenda & Forum for utvikling og miljø, 2020). However, around the launch in 2019, they pointed to the biggest challenge for implementation as ensuring policy coherence across sectors. They requested the Government to analyse dilemmas that could occur from implementing the plan (Forum for utvikling og miljø, Utviklingsfondet, et al., 2019). Several participants especially requested responses regarding potential dilemmas with trade and export interests (Forum for utvikling og miljø, 2021a; Forum for utvikling og miljø, Utviklingsfondet, et al., 2019), which I address in chapter 6. My conversation with Karin from an NGO illustrates how the excitement around the plan created expectations which were possibly tricky for the government to meet:

"It was not Astrup's favourite topic [*Minister of Development 2018-2019*]. But we continued to push our agenda, and eventually, the plan was finalised. We were happy to see that our input was reflected. So far, so good." Then she hesitated. "What happened then was somewhat strange, as vi had expectations that they were to outline specific objectives. And that the reference group would meet regularly."

Shore and Wright (2011, p. 14) state that 'policy' "is a political process involving many actors all proposing how people should relate to each other, conduct themselves and be governed". However, here, NGOs criticised the government's lack of proposals for how people should behave and be governed. This criticism has been voiced by civil society actors during interviews in my fieldwork, through webinars, and chronicles. Ole and Finn, working in two different civil society organisations, both questioned where the "action" in the action plan is. Karin pointed to the lack of clearly defined objectives and clear division of responsibility. A researcher further echoed these criticisms in an interview. He was asked to contribute to the mid-term evaluation of the plan. His impression was that little has happened since the launch because the responsibilities for implementation are not clearly defined, and the objectives are not made actionable. An adviser from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), perhaps among the plan's most active users, confirmed the lack of clearly defined objectives: "Of course, we use the action plan for sustainable food systems from 2019. It guides our work. However, the action plan does not have any concrete objectives or results frameworks to which we must report." The mid-term evaluation further describes how all signatory ministries used the action plan in their work on several occasions, however, mainly through references in speeches or as a guiding policy platform (KPMG, 2021).

Based on the observations and criticism mentioned above regarding lacking action points and analysis of dilemmas, I argue that a form of "document fetishism" is connected to the action plan. Several scholars address fetishism in political economy, famously Karl Marx (1932), who defined 'commodity fetishism' as the "reification of the commodity as an entity with a power and value of its own" (Marx, 1932, as cited in Gordillo, 2006, p. 163). Drawing on Marx, Taussig (1997, p. 94) underscores the significance of the fetish as registering "the representation rather than the being represented, the mode of signification at the expense of the thing being signified". My data shows politicians and bureaucrats attaching pride to the document and treating it as a product to be showcased in political meetings, international speeches, and an artefact "proving" that Norway has a tradition for cross-sectorial cooperation. Several bureaucrats and politicians even expressed that producing the action plan was a massive achievement in itself, emphasising its symbolic value. Their weight on the production of the action plan and how it represents Norwegian experience and expertise, rather than on the actions

following the plan, shows how the reification of the document is given higher value by its creators. As underscored by Taussig and illustrated by critique from civil society, this can happen at the expense of the actions the plan was seemingly intended to bring about.

**Fetishism portraying policies as meaningful systems for engagement**

The fetishism of the action plan carries some implications for the work of civil society actors, both concerning how the plan can create meaning and motivation and how it frames and constrains their work. A meeting with the NGO actor Karin illustrated how documents create unexpected relations, also for actors external to the organisation where the document is produced:

> I met Karin in her office. When I asked her about the action plan, she quickly turned to find the physical copy. It was placed on her shelf, and she did not have to look for it as she knew its exact position. While explaining her thoughts, she ran through the pages, quoting some of the action points by heart. It seemed like the plan was often in use.

This excerpt illustrates familiarity with the policy document, and the frequent use and knowledge of its content can indicate a sense of ownership. I detected a clear feeling of ownership from her during the interview, connected to the process of developing the document and expectations for implementation. As the research participants shared, the action plan met a need several organisations had addressed for years. NGOs made significant efforts to provide input to the plan and follow up on its implementation, and this work created expectations. Shore and Wright (2011) argue that policies can create new 'webs of meaning' and Ortner (1997, p. 138) interprets Geertz's understanding of meaning as "a set of culturally constructed and historically specific guides, frames, or models of and for human feeling, intention, and action". As the action plan evoked expectations, endeavours, ownership and disappointment, I suggest that this policy created a web of meaning.

Further, the document's fetishism possibly contributed to portraying the action plan and its surrounding activities as a meaningful system to engage in, seeing as the bureaucrats and politicians seemingly were attentive to and valued the document. Bringing back the quote from the first page of the thesis, I find that Neumann (2012, p. 80) elegantly describes how policy fetishism can conceal social and power relations behind policies and make them appear as meaningful systems to engage in:

> Making the world seem stable when it is in fact in constant flux means that wielding power involves the ability to freeze meaning. This has to be done by constantly repeating specific representations of things, actions, and identities, until what one repeats is naturalised to such an extent that it appears doxic.

These policy systems appear meaningful, yet also constrain civil society actors. As I have discussed in chapters 2 and 4, in her ethnography, Müller (2011) describes how engagement in policymaking processes which outcomes are of poorer quality than expected, can decrease civil society actors' room for manoeuvre. The research participants from civil society tried to change the policy direction in its making. In addition to Karin, Lorentz, from a different civil society organisation, also contributed to the plan's development. However, he finds that the plan is poorly written. Our conversation illustrates the dilemma they are left with after contributing to the plan and how the final product can constrain their work:

> "I currently utilise the document mostly as a reference document. To criticise the state and to hold them accountable for lacking implementation. However, I find the action plan poorly written. And what do you do when the document is finalised and is of poor quality, and you still must refer to it? There is not much to be done at that stage of the process", he said. He explained how this situation makes working with the respective policies challenging.

The civil society actors' relational ties to the document and their involvement in its development make it challenging for them to distance themselves from the final product. It becomes difficult for them to maintain *counter-conduct,* as referred to in chapter 4, being the "struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others" (Foucault et al., 2007). Chapter 4 discussed how the small-scale farmers Kjersti and Andrew maintained *counter-conduct* as they chose to stand outside of policymaking processes. However, in the case of the action plan, for Lorentz and Karin, choosing to engage in the policy process can make it challenging to uphold a clear differentiation between themselves and the authorities. When civil society actors are conducted this way, according to Müller (2011), they must make 'tactical' calculations, to "constantly play with events in order to transform them into opportunities for making an impact that may not last." (Müller, 2011, p. 284). A webinar further illustrated the challenge of entanglement. The moderator discussed potential dilemmas between food policies and trade (Utviklingsfondet et al., 2021). She asked the State Secretary for Development whether he could elaborate on how the action plan could better include international politics and trade agreements. In response, the State Secretary asserted that civil society was heavily involved in developing the plan, using this fact as quality assurance of the document.

The action plan produced a reference group, which possibly added constraints on the civil society actors. The research participants have expressed disappointment regarding the group's organisation, yet they still engage with it and attend meetings when organised. Thus, they entangle themselves further into the frame provided by politicians and bureaucrats. One can

wonder if they have any other choice. In this regard, I find it relevant to revisit my discussion in chapter 4 of Archetti's (1984) descriptions of the differences between Norway and Latin America. He claims it is easier for NGOs to avoid interweaving themselves in constraining structures in Latin America, as they do not work in a culture preoccupied with reaching consensus. They can take distance from political choices and show resistance directly. However, whether they manage to obtain their goals more efficiently is uncertain.

Concerning the reference group and its effects on civil society actors, and as discussed regarding the PCD Forum, the organisation of meetings significantly influences the outcomes (Brown et al., 2017). The NGO actor Finn explained how the members who were present did not fulfil the expressed purpose of the group:

> In most reference group meetings, a few people ask questions, like me, but only representatives from NORAD or MFA are present, despite the plan being cross-sectoral. Because of this, the few people that have questions rarely get responses, as the relevant ministries are absent. I have attempted to address policy incoherence between Norwegian free trade agreements and food security several times. However, proper answers to these questions can only come with the presence of both MFA and the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries. In addition to the questions, NORAD has held a few presentations. However, they mostly display projects already initiated before creating the action plan.

Brown et al. (2017) state that meetings are organised in ways that evoke actions on their own terms. The described setup above does not instantly promise to fulfil civil society's wishes regarding action and implementation. Moreover, several research participants from civil society have complained about the low frequency of meetings. The mid-term evaluation confirms this inactivity (KPMG, 2021). Finn explained that there have been 2-3 meetings thus far and that MFA excused themselves with the pandemic when confronted about the low frequency of meetings. When talking to the civil society actor Karin, she expressed disappointment concerning the low engagement from MFA.

Despite their limitations, these frames and constraining spaces are filled with creativity, making the policies valuable tools also for civil society actors. Shore and Wright (2011) assert that when actors cannot reverse a policy, they can strategically make the policy function differently than envisioned by its creators, e.g., adding their take through the translation of policies between contexts. Civil society actors have used webinars and chronicles, among other tools, to hold the government accountable for implementing the action plan. In these contexts, they can translate the policies in ways that can benefit their interests, e.g., to increase the public pressure on the government to implement the plan.

Shore and Wright (2011) argue that policymaking is not only a top-down approach. It is a dynamic and complex process of ideas and input from various actors, moving and transforming through numerous channels before producing certain artefacts, sometimes manifesting norms for the policy world. In line with this argument, and based on my fieldwork, I would claim that the creativity and participation of civil society bear fruits, leading the policies to serve some interests of civil society actors. Bureaucrats and politicians in this policy space sometimes adopt ideas created within civil society; hence 'tactical calculations' are not the only strategy for working in the periphery of the governmental sphere. According to several research participants, the action plan for sustainable food systems is partly produced because of demand from civil society.

## OVERSHADOWED BY NEW POLICY INITIATIVES

Several political initiatives emerged from the action plan. In conversation with a scientist researching food security, she confirmed that "the action plan has triggered several different political processes". Different initiatives have also been developed to continue the work for the PCD agenda. These new documents and initiatives can partly explain the decreasing attention and eagerness to implement the action plan for sustainable food systems. Documents are contested in numerous ways, yet Hibou (2015, as cited in Bierschenk, 2019) argues that an inescapability of bureaucracy is that bureaucratic documents are mainly contested by the production of other documents. In a conversation with a civil society actor, she speculated on the reasons for the lacking implementation of the action plan. She indicated that the action plan was contested by the production of a new policy document:

> For some reason, the reference group for the action plan was not prioritised, and we gave them feedback that we found this strange. I have thought that the reason could be lacking ownership from the political leaders at the time; perhaps Ulstein [*Minister of Development 2019-2021*] wanted more freedom. When reading the Norwegian strategy for humanitarian policies, I found a point about creating a strategy for climate change adaptation and requested information from MFA. They answered that they would not devote effort to this strategy. We continued requesting information on every occasion with Ulstein, and he suddenly initiated the work, devoting quite a lot of time and effort to it. He was more concerned about topics like poverty and climate change and so on, so perhaps he was more willing to devote efforts to this plan. It became his project, and it might have overshadowed the action plan for sustainable food systems. You know, there are few resources devoted to food security in the ministry.

The Minister launched the strategy for climate adaptation, prevention of climate-related disasters and hunger control in 2021. According to MFA (2021b), it provides guidelines for an intensified Norwegian effort to strengthen societies with high vulnerability to climate change. Similar to the explanations from the civil society actor, several of the research participants

elaborated on how the Minister had used much of his 'political capital'[4] to complete the strategy, thereby leaving the action plan for sustainable food systems in the shadow. Thus, whether or not the new strategy contested the plan, at least political attention and resources on food systems are scarce, possibly leading to one policy effort phasing out the other.

The strategy carried signatures from five ministries and explicitly mentioned the relevance of inter-departmental coordination. Thus, I consider this document part of the work for a systemic approach to food systems. I watched the digital launch of the strategy in April 2021, where the Minister of Development Ulstein and a State Secretary from MFA were seated in an elegant room with seemingly expensive decorations, high ceilings, and chandeliers. These elements together created a majestic atmosphere. With confidence, Minister Ulstein presented the strategy and told the audience that this was a day that he had been looking forward to (MFA, 2021a). However, despite the majestic frame and the asserted significance of the strategy, the document contained signatures from five ministries, yet only MFA was involved in the launch event. This could open questions about the feeling of ownership among the other four and how much political importance they attach to the strategy. In contrast, five ministers attended the Action Plan for Sustainable Food Systems launch back in 2019 (MFA, 2019). As with the action plan, civil society raised questions about who was responsible for implementing the strategy.

The fact that the strategy received similar criticism as the action plan can stem from the nature of bureaucratic knowledge production. As mentioned in chapter 4, Neumann (2012, p. 64) argues that texts produced in the MFA are suspiciously similar. He says: "Through no fault of any one individual, a bureaucracy left to its own devices will produce texts that resemble their predecessors and one another." He asserts it is because they are produced by including the say of all parts of the organisation, aiming to cause as little friction as possible. In this way, policymaking functions as a form of institutionalisation. Neumann (2012) argued that text production becomes "a question of ministerial identity building", framing the meaning-making processes of the bureaucrats. He further talks about the lack of attention to the audience of the texts and how they build on previous texts, which could also be reasons behind the similar critiques directed at the two documents.

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[4] 'Political capital' is as metaphor typically used in political theory to conceptualize the build-up of resources and power developed through relationships, confidence, goodwill, and influence between parties or politicians and other constituencies. It is thought of as a form of currency for mobilizing voters, attaining policy reform, or realizing other political goals. Definition adapted from Kjaer (2013) and Schugurensky (2000).

Although the strategy for climate adaptation has gained less attention than the action plan among the research participants and in the media, I see similar tendencies of 'document fetishism'. I find that the way the Minister of Development has addressed the document in public contexts focuses on the reification of the policy rather than the actual content. The value of the document's reification was illustrated in a debate I attended. A youth organisation asked the Minister why Norway is one of the countries giving the lowest portion of our aid budget to climate-smart agriculture and how the Government plans to address this (Forum for utvikling og miljø, 2021d). The Minister responded that we now have both the Action Plan for Sustainable Food Systems and the new Strategy for Climate Change Adaptation. He referred to the existence of the documents as the primary response to the question without putting heavy emphasis on actions to be taken or who would do so. Keeping in mind civil society's criticism of the lacking clarification of responsibilities for implementing the strategy, I find that the Minister indicates the value of the reification of the documents rather than their actual content.

## NEW ATTEMPTS AT POLICY COHERENCE

Regarding the PCD agenda, there have been new developments since the closure of the PCD Forum. For several years, NGOs have asked the Government to lay forth a national action plan to implement the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as part of their work to advocate for more policy coherence for development (Forum for utvikling og miljø, Kirkens Nødhjelp, et al., 2019). They wished for the plan to present concrete actions to achieve the goals, highlight the intrinsic dilemmas between them, and propose actions to solve these tensions. Their demand was heard, and the government launched the action plan in June 2021. The State Secretary for Development called the action plan a breakthrough for policy coherence (Utviklingsfondet et al., 2021). However, NGOs claimed there was little to no sign of how Norway plans to tackle dilemmas between political sectors. Further, they stated that the government showed little understanding of how Norwegian domestic and foreign policies are connected (Forum for utvikling og miljø, 2021b; Rødje & Odegard, 2021).

I met the civil society actor Finn on the roof of his office building, chatting over a coffee cup in the sun. He works for one of the organisations that requested the plan in the first place and showed frustration over the content of the action plan. We talked about many topics, and he seemed relaxed, answering my questions quickly as if he had prepared. When I asked about the action plan for the SDGs, he rolled his eyes and sighed. "I don't know what to say to best describe the plan", he said, agreeing with the critique of the document being free of descriptions of conflicts or dilemmas and concrete actions to reach the SDGs. "It sucks", he said bluntly and

ensured that I was more than welcome to quote that. He further wondered where the money was to follow up on strategy. In an interview with a bureaucrat working in MFA, I experienced that he surprisingly acted similar to Finn when describing the SDG action plan. He rolled his eyes and expressed that he was unsure what would happen with it, yet it is essential for his work.

My observations of research participants reacting to the plan through newspaper articles, webinars and the information I obtained in conversations with them verify several tendencies of the other initiatives relating to PCD and food systems approaches. First, the plan is an example of how policies are not merely top-down processes, as the idea is adopted from civil society organisations. Second, as Shore and Wright (2011) highlighted, once policies are created, they travel into new spaces with surprising outcomes, diverging from the original intention. I have discussed the effects of travelling policies in the previous and current chapter, where policy creators can fear how the policy is interpreted and used in other contexts. The disappointment from civil society actors about the outcomes of the action plan for the SDGs also illustrates the point by Shore and Wright (2011), yet differently. The politicians can utilise the plan for other purposes than what was intended by civil society actors. They can take the idea and then transform it into an artefact for political representation and international promotion, potentially causing frustration among NGOs. Third, and related to the previous point, based on observations, I find that the action plan for the SDGs also tends to be fetishised.

Despite their dissatisfaction with former action plans and the PCD Forum, civil society actors and farmers' organisations maintain hope for the new initiatives, at least in public settings. As mentioned in chapter 3, a new forum was presented in 2022. In the public hearing of the action plan for the SDGs, held in January 2022, civil society actors made requests regarding the Forum and expressed a wish to participate (LNU, 2022; Norges Bondelag, 2022; Spire, 2022a). Moreover, an adviser from the civil society network the Norwegian Forum of Environment and Development enthusiastically elaborated on policy coherence developments in 2021 in a webinar, demonstrating how they attach meaning to the new Forum and action plan (Forum for utvikling og miljø, 2021c):

> "In June, we finally received the Action Plan for the SDGs", he said with a big smile. "And in September, the Government launched a Forum for the SDGs where the Prime Minister will sit together with many ministers and civil society. We find both the action plan and the Forum important, and we hope they will strengthen the first version of the action plan and create a robust forum."

I find that their new faith in a similar structure to the Forum, which previously disappointed them, shows how the civil society actors are making 'tactical' calculations. This entails that

they "constantly play with events in order to transform them into opportunities for making an impact that may not last." (Müller, 2011, p. 284). The government promised a few changes from the previous PCD forum, and the policy frames, the action plan and the input forum, are transformed into seemingly meaningful systems for engagement. However, because of their difficulty with maintaining *counter-conduct*, these artefacts can constrain the space in which civil society actors can work to gain political influence.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter examines how initiatives for policy coherence and systemic approaches to food policies tend to become fetishised by bureaucrats and politicians, strengthening Norway's promotion as a "good state", as discussed in chapter 3, and ministerial identity building. By fetishised, I mean that their reification is given considerable value and power at the expense of the actual outcomes and implementation of actions. The branding of Norway in international contexts and the ministerial identity building are important frames for bureaucrats' meaning-making in their work. However, the chapter has also explored how bureaucrats can develop individual interests and meaning separate from their organisation, demonstrating the complexity of bureaucrats' roles.

The fetishism allows bureaucrats and politicians to uphold an image of giving political attention and resources to the topic of food systems, which affects civil society actors' meaning-making processes. The political attention can make the policy frames appear as meaningful systems to engage in for civil society actors yet engender frustration when their expectations are not met. Further, contributing to the policy development processes makes the civil society actors entangle themselves in frames from the authorities, such as multi-stakeholder committees, which challenges their opportunity to distance themselves from the process or exercise direct resistance towards the work. Thus, they keep conducting 'tactical calculations' by continuing to engage within the structures provided by the government in the hope that the government will meet their demands more extensively next time.

These policy initiatives have frustrated civil society actors, yet they are also valuable tools in their advocacy work. Despite facing constraints, civil society actors utilise creativity, and by referring to the existing policies, they can hold politicians accountable for their lacking action. Further, the policies are often based on ideas from civil society actors, which shows the dynamic nature of policy, and their potential to be bottom-up processes. However, as I have also discussed, political attention and resources directed to food systems are scarce; thus, one policy effort can phase out the other. Overall, in a landscape of scarce resources and paradoxes, the

actors' different ways of navigating the policy landscape might connect to what they see necessary to make meaning out of what they do.

# Chapter 6: Facing Meaninglessness in the Intersection between Trade and Seed Policies

Chapter 5 illustrated how policy actors worked for policy coherence and found different meaning in this work. However, as this thesis addresses actors' search for meaning in a policy world of incoherencies, I also wish to emphasise actors who do not find meaning in addressing policy incoherence. This chapter examines how policy actors navigate paradoxes between sectors themselves, drawing on the example of the paradox between Norwegian domestic policy governing farmers' rights and our demands to developing countries through The European Free Trade Association (EFTA) Free Trade Agreements. NGOs and farmers' organisations have brought public attention to this paradox (Peschard, 2021; Spire, 2022b), and research participants have mentioned it during interviews and events. However, not all relevant policy actors acknowledge the paradox, and few react to it publicly. I argue that several factors make it somewhat meaningless for policy actors working with seeds to address this and similar paradoxes. Neoliberal influences on policymaking constitute an obstacle that can render it meaningless to challenge trade policies. Further, the actors often face a lack of resources for their work. Finally, I reflect on how actors' depiction of the state affects and substantiates their meaning-making process, whether caring for obtaining policy coherence or not.

My meeting with a bureaucrat within food policy demonstrated that not all actors are concerned with incoherence between political sectors. On the floor of his office, he asked me if I wanted coffee. While we waited for the coffee machine to finish, he admitted that he did not remember my thesis topic. "I look at contradictions and paradoxes in Norwegian seed policy and food policy", I said. He sighed with an unenthusiastic look, stating, "yes, well, there are always conflicts". While working for sustainable food production, the bureaucrat seemingly showed disinterest in policy paradoxes, although they potentially hinder his work's success. Such a perspective stands in contrast to actors actively demanding initiatives for enhancing PCD, as elaborated in chapters 3 and 5. The actors' frames for meaning-making can explain this contrast.

Similar to the bureaucrat above, other actors working with seeds showed reluctance towards addressing paradoxes with other sectors. Referring to chapter 4, policy actors working with seeds seemed to genuinely care for seed security and not solely for fulfilling their job description. However, during fieldwork, I encountered Norwegian trade policies going against

this work. Still, many actors working with seeds did not seem concerned about the issue, which I found puzzling. How could they carry this passion for promoting farmers' rights but not bother that Norwegian free trade agreements compromise these rights?

Several food policy actors have pointed to incoherence between objectives for development and food policies and goals related to trade (see Førsund et al., 2021; Louwaars, 2007; Spire, 2021; Tankesmien Agenda & Forum for utvikling og miljø, 2020). Leira et al. (2007) claim that Norwegian trade policies constitute a case of "organised schizophrenia" as the government struggles to balance their altruistic brand with national interests. This chapter addresses a paradox between trade and food policies, brought to my attention during fieldwork, namely the divergence between Norwegian domestic policy governing farmers' rights and our demands to developing countries through EFTA Free Trade Agreements. A research participant from an NGO said that farmers' organisations in developing countries had greatly criticised their counterparts and NGOs in Norway regarding this policy incoherence. The farmers' organisations questioned the passivity on the issue and urged the research participant and his colleagues to pressure the Norwegian government. However, the paradox is not spoken very loudly in Norway, and little has been done to address it.

## WHAT IS THE UPOV PARADOX?

As discussed in chapters 3 and 4, plant breeders' rights are often conflicting with small-scale farmers' rights, as their intellectual property rights of seeds can collide with farmers' flexibility to utilise, exchange and save seeds (Aistara, 2011; Andersen, 2017; IPC, 2021; Peschard, 2021; Vásquez, 2017). Central to the paradox I wish to address is the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV). UPOV is an intergovernmental institution established by European plant breeders (APBREBES, 2022b), working to develop "an effective system of plant variety protection, with the aim of encouraging the development of new varieties of plants" (UPOV, 2011). There are multiple acts of the UPOV convention, and for each revision, member countries have strengthened plant breeders' rights (APBREBES, 2022b). Today, two acts of the UPOV Convention are in use; one from 1978 and a revision in 1991 (Peschard, 2021). As a member of UPOV, a country obligates itself to change national legislation on plant variety protection following the acts of the convention.

There are significant differences between the two acts. The 1991 Act strengthens the rights of plant breeders in numerous ways. "It extends protection to all plant genera and species; it lengthens the term of protection (…), and the 1991 Act also restricts farmers' rights to save and exchange seeds" (Peschard, 2021, p. 3). In 2005, the Norwegian plant breeding industry

proposed to change Norwegian legislation on plant variety protection to follow the 1991 Act. However, farmers' unions, NGOs and political parties resisted the proposal[5], mainly for two reasons. First, the changes would restrict farmers' customary rights to collect and reuse farm-saved seeds (Andersen, 2005). Second, the costs for Norwegian farmers would increase, as farmers would need to buy new seeds for every harvesting season or pay fees for using farm-saved seeds (Andersen, 2005). The Parliament rejected the proposal, and no one has since attempted to change this legislation in Norway. Consequently, the country stands firm as a user of the 1978 Convention Act (Peschard, 2021).

However, attitudes within national agriculture policies do not necessarily align with Norwegian foreign policies. As elaborated in chapters 3 and 4, Norway is a keen promoter of farmers' rights in international settings. With the UNFSS seed initiative proposal, Norway's image as a 'good state' was strengthened concerning farmers' access and rights, as discussed in chapters 3 and 4. Nevertheless, Norwegian foreign policies also concern trading interests with other countries. Trade agreements are one of the government's main tools for ensuring Norwegian businesses' success abroad (The Norwegian Government, 2021). Norway primarily negotiates free trade agreements through EFTA, established for countries outside the European Union (Ministry of Trade Industry and Fisheries, 2021). These trade agreements include an obligation to join UPOV 1991; thus, the EFTA countries actively demand that the countries they are negotiating with change their legislation on plant variety protection. These countries include several low- and middle-income countries such as Morocco, Jordan, Egypt and Indonesia (Alliance Sud et al., 2020).

Consequently, as I see it, and as presented by some NGOs and research participants, Norway contains paradoxical policies on plant variety protection. Norway insists on remaining with the 1978 Act to avoid removing farmers' flexibility and breaking their customary rights to save and use seeds. We further act as leaders in defending farmers' rights in international forums. Regardless, Norway is part of a trade alliance demanding that developing countries adhere to the 1991 Act and move away from farmers' flexibility and rights. Although I recognise how UPOV themselves do not address or refer to this paradox, I will, for simplicity, refer to the presented incoherence as 'the UPOV paradox'.

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[5] Responses to a public hearing from a range of stakeholders showing resistance can be found here: https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/horing-forslag-til-ny-lov-om-plantefored/id97784/?expand=horingssvar&lastvisited=undefined

**Endeavours to address the UPOV paradox**

Few NGOs in Norway engage with trade policies. However, Handelskampanjen (*In English: The Trade Campaign*), an alliance of different organisations such as trade unions, farmers' unions and environmental organisations (Handelskampanjen, 2022), are among the few actors who have actively addressed the UPOV paradox. In 2018, together with other actors from Norway and Switzerland, they sent an open letter to the negotiators of an agreement between EFTA and Indonesia (Alliance Sud et al., 2018). In 2020, they sent a new letter together with 250 organisations, addressing all free trade agreements negotiated by EFTA, and asked for the removal of the UPOV obligation (Alliance Sud et al., 2020). Although these letters seemingly constituted the primary efforts to protest the trade practice, Handelskampanjen also made a podcast episode about the UPOV paradox (Handelskampanjen, 2017) and organised internal seminars. However, one of the alliance's members said that the COVID-19 pandemic overshadowed the work, as they had to focus on vaccine patents instead.

The Norwegian Development Fund has also been a signatory to both letters to EFTA and is part of an international network of civil society organisations called APBREBES. The network promotes plant breeding for the benefit of society, a complete realisation of farmers' rights to plant genetic resources and supports agricultural biodiversity (APBREBES, 2022a). They are one of the leading civil society observers present at the UPOV meetings. APBREBES produced a report exploring the ongoing debates and arguments for sticking with the UPOV 1978 convention, including a case on Norway (Peschard, 2021). This report pointed to the UPOV paradoxes in the EFTA countries (Peschard, 2021).

The described activities of the Norwegian Development Fund and Handelskampanjen are the main advocacy actions that I have stumbled upon during my fieldwork. They are spread out and do not constitute constant pressure on the government to address the issue. A researcher told me he had written about the paradox once but had not worked with it much. Most research participants answered that they do not work with the issue. Those who have worked with it already expressed that they wish to look more into the topic, yet with few concrete plans. After my fieldwork ended, Spire, a youth NGO, also included a demand in their campaign for Norway to remove the UPOV 91 obligation in trade agreements (Spire, 2022b). However, when I asked them how to take this political recommendation further, they were unsure.

## A THOUSAND PAGES AND ICY LANGUAGE

To examine why many actors seem indifferent concerning the UPOV paradox, I first wish to discuss the accessibility relevant policy actors have to the content of trade agreements. Here, I

find it relevant to discuss the trade agreement's materiality, referring to the size and format of the physical document and its language. As elaborated in previous chapters, Asdal and Reinertsen (2020) and Shore and Wright (2011) emphasise the analytical value of the materiality of documents for revealing power relations and understanding policy processes. Examining these qualities, I found aspects of inaccessibility that potentially lessen the actors' engagement. I learned of these aspects from a research participant working with trade policies. He told of unwieldy document lengths and brutal, inaccessible language, in addition to how the government tactlessly delivers the document for democratic processing:

> It is infrequent that people check what the agreements contain textually. One thousand pages are delivered to the Parliament, and they are given two days to react. There is rarely an orientation about the agreement's content, and in general, there is a lack of available information. (…) Also, trade agreements are written with icy legal language, and I find it extremely brutal.

Hege Skarrud, the president of the NGO Attac Norway, echoed the feeling of inaccessibility in a podcast about the EFTA-Mercosur trade agreement. Her remarks further illustrate who is allowed to write and read these documents:

> The negotiations of trade agreements take place behind closed doors because the country wishes to keep the cards close to their chest and avoid disclosing what they are willing to put into the agreement. It is a vast democratic problem because then civil society organisations or other interest groups, or the elected representatives in the Parliament, do not get information about what rights, raw materials, and goods are traded away and how these agreements can potentially change a country's resource base. Perhaps the private sector or other actors with narrow interests are invited in (Førsund et al., 2021).

In addition to inaccessible content, it appears challenging to protest trade policies in inter-departmental committees, as the people working with trade are sometimes inaccessible. As elaborated in chapter 5, the NGO actor Finn held a seat in the reference group for the action plan on sustainable food systems. When he multiple times attempted to address policy incoherencies between Norwegian trade agreements and food security, he received no reply. The Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries were rarely present, and no other bureaucrat answered on their behalf.

I have not spoken to bureaucrats and politicians who are central in the negotiations of trade agreements. Nevertheless, these stories from civil society actors illustrate how an immense page number, opaque language, and the document's processing convolute their advocacy for social and environmental concerns. In addition to their focus on documents as tools, their work, and how documents travel, Asdal and Reinertsen (2020) underscore the need to study how

documents attempt to establish authority and trust. The legal and opaque language likely serves a purpose, as these documents are binding agreements. However, the vocabulary and length can also render free trade agreements irrelevant to the public and best left with experts. Discussing the exclusion of immigrants, Fuglerud (2004) shows how bureaucrats and politicians can transform social issues into cold neutral documents. He states that "to the people working within this system, a 'case' is not perceived as a person or an individual life story. A case is a series of issues materialised in a set of documents bundled together and carrying a particular registration number" (Fuglerud, 2004, p. 36). Similarly, I argue that the language and size and the processing of trade agreements make elements of social welfare, environmental issues and human rights into apolitical complex legal matters that seemingly do not concern the public. Such hinders can portray it as excessively challenging and thus meaningless for many actors to challenge trade policies.

## LACKING POLITICAL ATTENTION AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Beyond dealing with inapproachable documents and a shortage of time, the actors problematising trade policies are seemingly working with few financial resources. This lack of resources became apparent when I met David in a restaurant, a civil society actor working with trade policies. David arrived fifteen minutes late and told me that he had rushed. He had a lot to carry and put multiple document binders on the table to release the weight. It was the large kind of binders that one usually finds on an office shelf and not carried around by people. Additional paper floated out on the table, and he placed his backpack on the bench. The way he carefully put it down made it look heavy. He sighed and breathed heavily. «Are you tired?» I asked. David confirmed his tiredness and told me that he currently had extreme workloads. He explained that his position entails many administrative tasks in addition to advocacy work.

I wish to reflect on some aspects of the meeting with David that subtly show policy in practice and might constrain non-state actors' possibility to challenge policy issues in trade, such as the UPOV paradox. David carried binders, additional papers, and heavy bags. These factors can point to the inaccessibility of trade agreements, as he had to carry many documents and gear to orient himself in the political work. The documents could have been explanatory notes and policy analyses to assist his understanding. The number of documents also potentially shows the size of trade agreements and the challenge of getting through them. Our meeting also demonstrated the pressure on time. He hurried and apologised for not making the appointment in time, stating that the workload was considerable these days. Our meeting further revealed the range of tasks that actors engaged in trade policies tackle. David deals with organisational

matters such as accounting, communication, and political work, demonstrating a lack of resources and time. Further, as few actors are involved in the field, they cover all trade-related topics, ranging from agriculture to medicines.

Considering these circumstances, it might appear inapproachable for actors not already engaged in trade policies to commence work on the UPOV paradox. The actors working with seeds also face a lack of financial resources decreasing their possibilities for challenging trade policies. Policy outlines put forth by the state and reliance on commitment from the state can further challenge the work. As illustrated in chapter 4, practices, science and discourses challenging the advancement of seed policies can also narrow their motivation and prospects for success with the UPOV paradox. As discussed in chapter 4, the research participants explained that politicians are less hands-on concerning seeds as it is a sector of low economic interest. I also discussed how the topic is a 'niche' within a 'niche' regarding political attention, as food policies within development politics have long been in the shadow of other topics. Müller (2011) argues that when the frames for work are set, the actors must continuously take advantage of occasions to convert them into chances for making an impact that may only be temporary. The actors are constrained by a lack of financial resources, powerful discourses and insufficient political attention to seed security. For these reasons, it might seem more meaningful for the actors not already involved with the UPOV paradox to choose opportunities where they see prospects for success rather than protesting trade policies.

Even though the circumstances are different for bureaucrats compared to NGO actors and researchers, they also face obstacles in addressing these issues. When I interviewed the bureaucrat Thorbjørn, I received signals about the intersection between seed and trade policies being a sensitive area. He did not have to say much; the initial reactions showed me that this was not a topic that was uncomplicated for him to address. I asked him: "when similar topics *(farmers' rights)* are addressed within trade agreements, are the opinions unanimous to the same extent as within seed policies?" He laughed loudly for a long time. "You seem like you know what is going on", he said and continued laughing. He smiled but mumbled and stumbled with his words. Then he waited some seconds before he continued to talk.

The following excerpt from my conversation with Thorbjørn does not explicitly tell how his ministry works to address the issue. Still, he points to issues of rendering intellectual property rights apolitical and a likely cause for the reluctance towards removing the UPOV reference from the trade agreements. "There are some delicate situations here, but we keep pushing". Thorbjørn laughed nervously. Referring to the UPOV paradox, he explained that an agency

involved in developing trade agreements treats intellectual property rights (IPR) as neutral tools promoting innovation regardless of sector. As I have explained previously, promoting intellectual property rights can challenge farmers' rights; thus, they are not considered neutral by all. Thorbjørn futher explained that in EFTA negotiations, Switzerland is responsible for the section on IPR, including the UPOV 1991 obligation. He continued:

> Switzerland goes even further in presenting IPRs as neutral. However, they are also an excellent ally for Norway in the international negotiations on farmers' rights. To answer your question, I would rather say that there are interesting ongoing processes. I would not believe that any actor means that UPOV 91 contributes to more export from the EFTA countries. Perhaps the reluctance towards removing it concerns the fear of 'if we remove the UPOV reference, what will be next? Patents on medicines?

First, without knowing exactly how bureaucrats work to address the UPOV paradox in inter-departmental meetings, the nervous laughter, the remarks on delicate situations and "interesting ongoing processes" indicate tensions between different parts of the government apparatus. Second, annotations on how actors depict intellectual property rights as neutral tools can indicate the precedence of neoliberal economic models. Such models can affect the meaning-making processes of bureaucrats as they make it challenging for those who work to promote other concerns than economic ones, such as farmers' rights.

## "EVERYTHING HAS COME TO BE CONSIDERED TRADE"

I have discussed how actors working with seeds face obstacles if they wish to address the UPOV paradox: inaccessibility of trade agreements, lacking political attention on their own topic and lacking financial resources for their work and work challenging trade policies. Additionally, they face discourses rendering intellectual property rights apolitical. I argue that all these factors can be caused by a more overarching set of constraints affecting policymaking, namely neoliberalism. Through different expressions, I find that neoliberal influence on policies renders it meaningless for the actors to challenge trade policies or precisely the UPOV paradox. Neoliberal approaches can affect all segments of society as they embed an understanding of social relations as economics (Malkenes, 2016). Thus, such perspectives can affect people's meaning-making processes, first, in the way that they can guide people's interests towards economic value. Second, neoliberalism's effects on society's organisation can engender frustration and challenge the meaning of people working for other principles than economic ones.

The obstacles faced by the research participants are seemingly rooted in how neoliberal approaches can direct resources and attention away from policies promoting environmental and

social concerns toward economic ones. Harvey (2005, p. 2) defines neoliberalism as "in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade". Neoliberalism depends on the state as creator and guarantor for institutional frameworks facilitating these practices (Harvey, 2005). Within the sphere of policy, Shore and Wright (2011) discussed several examples of how policies have represented and influenced the evolution toward systems of neoliberal governance. In addition, Burchell (1996) and Ferguson and Gupta (2002) argue that the logic of the market has been protracted to central functions of the state so that principal state organisations run according to an "enterprise model".

Concerning the paradoxes between trade and seed policies, Harvey (2005) explicitly mentions that free trade and substantial private property rights are the backbones of the institutional framework characterising society today. Several researchers and NGOs echo his remarks on the weight of free trade agreements in our current society. In a Norwegian podcast about the EFTA-Mercosur agreement, the Argentinian researcher Javier I. Echaide and Helene Bank, adviser in the Norwegian alliance "For the Welfare State" (*For velferdsstaten)*, both shared their views on the supremacy of free trade agreements and economic growth in society today. Echaide stated, "Free trade takes precedence. Finances take precedence. The multinational companies take precedence". Bank continued by saying that "Everything has come to be considered trade. Welfare schemes, schools, health. Nothing is sacred to that definition of what can be considered goods and services and trade." (Førsund et al., 2021).

These statements and Harvey's arguments on the supremacy of free trade and private property rights can further explain the potential meaninglessness connected to the UPOV paradox. Helene Bank stated that nothing is sacred to what can be considered goods, services and trade. When our economy builds on neoliberal principles, efforts to frame seeds according to economic value and property rights can easily take precedence over framings emphasising cultural and societal values. Chapter 4 discussed how private corporations and large international institutions could render seeds' social and cultural values invisible to serve commercial interests. Li (2014b) and Demeritt (2001) discuss the concept of 'statistical picturing', a process that discounts current uses, homogenises, and aggregates all types of a resource under a new label, adjusted for the desired usage. In this thesis, I have mentioned several examples of statistical picturing of seeds, such as talk about 'improved seed' and discourses supporting the rights of plant breeders to develop new varieties for commercial use.

These framings can find support in neoliberal principles, placing actors working for other goals in an underdog situation, possibly challenging the meaning they connect to their work.

As explained in chapter 2, Engelke and Tomlinson (2007) emphasize the value of understanding meaninglessness to reveal how meaning is more than a product to be revealed, rather a process and potential beset with insecurity and conflict. The reluctance to address the UPOV paradox and some actors' unwillingness to explain their passivity can demonstrate the insecure and conflicted aspects of maintaining meaning in one's work. The 'David versus Goliath'[6] situation can steer them to focus on more achievable goals than resisting parts of trade agreements, although they are aware of the policies that undermine their work. Despite diverging meanings held by the different policy actors in the policy world of seeds, they all show passion for the topic and stand together to get political attention, competing for resources and attention against other fields of food policy. Several also work for breakthroughs in international negotiations regarding farmers' rights. Because of the neoliberal structures framing policymaking, devoting resources to remove the UPOV obligation from EFTA agreements might take excessive time and effort, which could remove the actors' possibilities for obtaining other victories and perhaps give them a sense of meaninglessness.

## DIVERGING PORTRAYALS OF THE GOVERNMENT APPARATUS

Drawing on the discussion of meaninglessness connected to policy paradoxes above and my elaborations in the previous chapter on actors working for policy coherence, I wish to reflect on how research participants portray the state when discussing policy paradoxes. I argue that their depictions of the government apparatus substantiate their meaning-making processes. As mentioned in chapter 2, Shore and Wright (2011) also criticise policy practitioners, a category under which most of the research participants can be considered, for depicting policymaking as coming from some rational concrete authority. I have found differences between the policy actors regarding whether they refer to the government apparatus as a rational entity or a network of individual people with different interests.

### "I believe that in this field, it is very much about people"

The first group of actors portrays the government apparatus as complex and incoherent when discussing paradoxes, as seen with actors in this chapter. One of these actors is the bureaucrat Thorbjørn, and above, I explained that he stated "Switzerland is responsible for negotiating the section on IPR, including the UPOV 1991 obligation. They go even further in presenting IPRs

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[6] David versus Goliath is an English expression used to describe "a situation in which a small or weak person or organization tries to defeat another much larger or stronger opponent", https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/david-and-goliath

as neutral. However, they are also an excellent ally in the international negotiations on plant genetic resources and farmers' rights.". As elaborated, there is often a contradiction between depicting IPRs as neutral tools and defending farmers' rights. However, Thorbjørn states that Switzerland has such an approach to IPRs, and is also a good ally for promoting farmers' rights. Interestingly, Thorbjørn's claim shows how he, as a bureaucrat relates to another country's government apparatus recognising the inherent tensions and diverging interests found within it, conversely to what is often conveyed in the practitioner perspective (see Shore & Wright, 2011).

Other research participants held similar views of governmental authorities containing different 'policy worlds' with individual interests. I asked a researcher what he believed was the reason for the lack of attention to the UPOV paradox. He said that "I believe the reason is grounded in the fact that the people in Switzerland working with trade are very different people from those working with seeds, and the same goes for Norway." A different research participant also referred to individuals' effect on policymaking when I asked him about why the farmers' perspective has arisen on the agenda lately:

> Do you have any other thoughts on why it has come up more on the agenda lately?

> I think it is rather strange that it has taken so long. I do not know what I can say and not say here. *He laughed*. I believe that in this field it is very much about people. And what people are in which positions, and what those people are doing. I think that sometimes the approach to seed policies depends on which network you belong to. And in a way, the position has been confirmed, where one belongs, which people.

The examples from my fieldwork represent an approach to the government apparatus, substantiating the actors' meaning connected to focusing on their own sector. By arguing that nothing has been done with the UPOV paradox because different people are placed in different sectors and by recognising the state's complexity, these actors make obtaining policy coherence seem unattainable. This depiction of the government apparatus might legitimise their lack of interference in another political sphere. In their own sphere, they have the chance to acquire political breakthroughs. Thus, they maintain the meaning connected to their work by sticking to their sphere.

**Seeing the state as a concrete entity**
On the other hand, in their navigation of paradoxes, different actors find meaning in considering the state as a concrete entity. Shore and Wright (2011) criticised conventional policy studies for containing this view and underscored how one must integrate relational and complex aspects of policy processes. However, I find it puzzling that Shore and Wright direct the same critique at practitioners' perspectives without analysing their interests and meaning in carrying a view

of the state as a concrete entity. My fieldwork has shown that it can be in the interest of state and non-state actors to maintain a view of the government apparatus as one concrete entity when addressing policy paradoxes. Similarly, Taussig (2005) concurs that more nuanced framings of the state would complicate the work of both civil society actors and bureaucrats. He states that they are both interested in maintaining the mystification around the state and the government apparatus. This argument is reminiscent of my discussion in chapter 4 regarding the utility of depicting harmony for actors in the policy world of seeds.

The quotes below are some of many examples I have gathered through my fieldwork where civil society actors address 'Norway' as one rational actor when talking about policy coherence and paradoxes, illustrating the practitioner's perspective:

> "Norway has a very negative effect on other countries; we rank among the lowest at the SDG Index's spillover ranking, which measures the negative consequences a country has on other countries' ability to achieve the sustainability goals". (Forum for utvikling og miljø, 2021c).

> "A significant challenge will be to ensure that the plan contributes to coherent policies, as Norway has committed itself to". (Forum for utvikling og miljø, Utviklingsfondet, et al., 2019).

> "It is bizarre that Norway follows one convention itself but demands others to follow another. But I think maybe this happens because Switzerland is very much in favour of UPOV", a research participant from an NGO said about the UPOV paradox.

These statements further illustrate the argument of Shore and Wright (2011, p. 4) regarding how the 'practitioner perspective' assumes that the rational authority and policies as objective entities have the potential to "reorganise bureaucratic action to solve particular 'problems' and produce a 'known' (or desired) outcome". However, suppose civil society actors working for policy coherence conceive the state as a broad and complex web of actors with different interests, as done by other policy actors above. This view would complicate their work dramatically and threaten the 'web of meaning' they connect to the PCD agenda. The agenda demands solutions or policies to solve the problems connected to policy incoherence. A rational entity such as "Norway", "the authorities", or "the government" is easier to hold accountable for what they consider as policy paradoxes or gaps in a well-functioning society.

Being confronted with paradoxes, bureaucrats and politicians also rely on this mystification and depiction of the government apparatus as a rational entity. Above, I discussed how the bureaucrat Thorbjørn recognises internal tensions. However, these remarks were shared with me in a private interview. During fieldwork, in public settings, all bureaucrats I interacted with have addressed "Norway" or the government apparatus as one objective entity. As Heyman

(2004, p. 490) puts it, it can be of use for bureaucrats to communicate rationality and coherence to conceal political agendas and "legitimise policies that otherwise might be questioned". The example of my conversation with Thorbjørn and the depiction of the state as a concrete entity in public settings shows an inconsistency between bureaucratic discourse and practice.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, I elaborated on the case of the UPOV paradox and addressed how the research participants navigate paradoxes and incoherencies between political sectors based on how they find meaning in their work. Looking at the UPOV paradox, I have found that few actors work to address it. However, a lack of resources, time and access to trade documents challenge their efforts. Among the research participants from the policy world of seeds, many actors did not show great interest or concern for the topic. I have argued that the neoliberal influence on policies and economic structures renders it meaningless for many policy actors to address issues concerning trade policies. The actors encounter this neoliberal influence through inaccessibility of trade agreements, lack of financial resources and other factors favouring economic interests over social and environmental concerns. Discourses rendering trade agreements and intellectual property rights as 'neutral' or apolitical complex matters also make it challenging to work with these issues. As actors in the policy world for seeds face a lack of resources and political attention, moving out of their policy world diverts their focus from obtaining breakthroughs within seed policy processes and, consequently, challenges the meaning connected to their work. This analysis further illustrates that potential work for policy coherence does not happen in a vacuum but in a landscape of power inequalities between thematic sectors.

Finally, I reflected on how the actors' framings of the government apparatus as one rational entity or as a complex social web of people with different interests substantiates their meaning-making processes differently. This accounts for both actors who work with policy coherence and who do not. For actors who do not find meaning in addressing policy paradoxes, such as those reluctant to address the UPOV paradox, portraying the state as a complex web of people with different interests can legitimise their lack of interference in another political sphere. On the other hand, depictions of the state as one concrete entity can serve the interests of both state and non-state actors in their work for more coherence.

# Chapter 7: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have attempted to show how policymakers and relevant stakeholders are driven by their strives to find meaning in a complex and sometimes meaningless policymaking landscape. I have done so by examining their navigation of paradoxes. Throughout the thesis, I investigated deliberate initiatives for creating policy coherence and the navigation of conflicts between political spheres. Drawing on theory from the anthropology of policy, I have sought to reveal the social relations, random events, power struggles and external influences affecting and constituting the policy worlds of food and seeds. These perspectives have proved helpful in deconstructing policymaking to pick apart depictions of rationality to reveal social and power relations embedded in policies. However, as I found that the contributions from Shore and Wright (2011) lacked sufficient analysis of the interest actors have in portraying policymaking as rational, I enriched my analysis with other theoretical approaches.

I have argued for a fragile harmony in the policy world of seeds. The actors involved face multiple tensions and incoherent objectives connected to ways of conceptualising resources and their opinions on whether to engage with ideology or politics in research and bureaucracy. There are also disagreements about policy processes, language, and how to frame the political issues. Different *professional thought worlds* further make it challenging to unite their standpoints. Nevertheless, the actors uphold harmonious discourses to maintain seeds on the national agenda of development policies, competing with other topics for resources and political attention. Communicating agreement and harmony thus functions as a tool for meaning-making, despite working in an environment filled with tensions.

Despite witnessing tensions within the political landscape, the actors differ in their wishes to work for policy coherence. Some actors strive to obtain coherence. Others believe there will always be conflicts; hence it does not make sense for them to put great efforts into policy coherence work. Concerning the former group of actors, I have demonstrated how bureaucrats and politicians initiate projects and policy development to achieve policy coherence. However, I argue that they tend to fetishise these policies, giving larger value to the reification of the policy than the actual content. Among other interests, I find that they do so to strengthen the branding of Norway as a "good state". Policy fetishism also allows them to uphold an image of giving political attention and resources to the topic of food systems. However, this thesis also points to the complexity of bureaucrats' roles (Heyman, 2004), illustrating how they connect great pride to their work and express disappointment when their policy products are not referred

to in relevant contexts. At the same time, they can come to terms with the temporary nature of their work, illustrated through governmental shifts when strategies and action plans can cease to be in use.

Policy fetishism can further make the policies and their surrounding activities resemble meaningful systems for civil society actors to engage in, given the political attention from politicians and bureaucrats. However, civil society actors experience frustration when these beliefs do not meet reality. Still, they utilise creativity and their agency to put their take on policy outcomes. The policy initiatives studied in this thesis have often arisen based on ideas from civil society, indicating how policies are not merely top-down approaches yet dynamic processes which can also start from the bottom-up.

Actors from civil society both carry interests in utilising these policy initiatives, yet they also see themselves forced to conduct 'tactical calculations' as described by Müller (2011). Contributing with input to policy development, they entangle themselves in the structures of the authorities, which challenge their opportunity to distance themselves from the process or exercise resistance towards the work. Thus, many conduct 'tactical calculations', attempting to utilise creativity with opportunities to make an impact, which may not last. This resembles remarks by Archetti (1984), who states that in Norway, actors involved in policy processes whose views or objectives are not sufficiently integrated typically choose to overcome their disagreements once decisions are made. They do so to be interpreted as equal and participating teammates who put decisions into action. Such behaviour can also be seen as part of the consensus culture in Norwegian political life (Archetti, 1984; Neumann, 2012).

Bureaucrats, politicians, and civil society actors hold different views of the government apparatus, in line with how they navigate policy paradoxes. Bureaucrats and politicians can benefit from depicting the government apparatus as a concrete entity to conceal paradoxes and portray the state as a coherent and rational actor, disguising power struggles and complexity embedded in policymaking. The civil society actors wishing for more action to enhance PCD also depend on seeing the state as one entity as they must hold someone or something accountable for coordination.

On the contrary, some actors benefit from portraying the government as complex and driven by people's interests. This thesis looked at the divergence between Norwegian domestic policy governing farmers' rights and the country's demands on developing countries through EFTA Free Trade Agreements. I argue that this example illustrates how relevant policy actors in

addressing this issue face barriers through neoliberal policy influence and inaccessibility to necessary information and can find more meaning by working for breakthroughs within their sector. Stating that the government apparatus consists of many different people with different interests, they can legitimise their lack of action on challenging trade policies. The barriers and prospects for meaning are seemingly why many actors do not address the paradox in Norway, despite receiving heavy criticism from farmers' organisations in developing countries. This analysis further illustrates that potential work for policy coherence does not happen in a vacuum but in a landscape of power inequalities between different thematic policy sectors.

Thus, working for policy coherence is a tricky exercise. For actors striving to enhance the PCD agenda, the challenge can also stem from the existence of a paradox between their own struggles with capacity, time, power battles and incoherencies and their expectations that the government apparatus or 'Norway' function as a concrete entity with the potential for policy coherence. However, as with the other actors examined in this thesis, I interpret their endeavours for PCD to spring from a need to avoid meaninglessness, as they see their work undermined by other political sectors.

As commented in the introduction, "Making the world seem stable when it is in fact in constant flux means that wielding power involves the ability to freeze meaning" (Neumann, 2012, p. 80). All policy actors in this thesis freeze meaning in their own ways, affected by their roles, cultural frames, interests, and power relations. Shore and Wright (2011) assert policy worlds to be 'domains of meaning'. The actors adjust their way of speaking, their behaviour in public and private arenas, and their actions according to where they find their work most meaningful. Some benefit from depicting the policy world as stable. Others face powerful barriers, such as policy opponents with more considerable economic value, and benefit from portraying the policy landscape as vastly complex. By fetishizing policies, bureaucrats and politicians can also 'freeze' the meaning of civil society actors in portraying policies as meaningful systems for engagement.

What is certain is that inattention to policy actors' meaning, fear of meaninglessness, individual interests and agendas can contribute to incomplete policy analysis and misguide our understanding of the dynamics and outcomes of policy processes. Integrating power analysis in the study of meaning is also vital for comprehending policy actors' frames and constraints. Much anthropological analysis is conducted on the realities of development beneficiaries. However, more research is necessary on policymakers' experienced realities and constraints to inform the progression towards sustainable food systems and development policies.

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