Building relationships: Is this the answer to effective nutrition policy formulation?

# **ABSTRACT**

Policy makers are still struggling to deliver effective nutrition policies, as nutrition policy development can be lost among other competing demands from what is a complex, interconnected food system. Therefore, we explored the relevance of including a wider (relational) marketing perspective to enable effective nutrition policy formulation through in-depth interviews with food system stakeholders and focus groups with citizens. A relational approach would release the potential to build trust and collaboration, necessary for policy implementation, by focusing on the shared goal of citizen wellbeing. A power shift is needed from large corporations to governments and end-users (consumers/citizens). For this to happen, governments need to address power sources to orchestrate policy development, rather than merely monitoring the actor set. Acknowledged interdependence that re-balances power and includes citizens’ input in nutrition policy development is vital.

# **INTRODUCTION**

Food policy shapes what people eat, how food is produced and distributed and at what cost. It impacts people’s health and wellbeing as well as economies and the environment (Hawkes and Parsons, 2019). The ineffectiveness of current food polices, as manifested in persisting food-related problems and increasing food system pressures, makes clear the need for better food policy (Lloyd-Williams *et al.*, 2014; Candel and Pereira, 2017; Hawkes and Parsons, 2019; Swinburn *et al.*, 2019). Comprehensive food policies include three pillars; nutrition/healthy eating, food safety and a sustainable food supply (World Health Organisation, 2001). This paper focuses on the first pillar, i.e., nutrition/healthy eating, and therefore addresses nutrition policy.

Nutrition policies are constructed and shaped by three main parties: government, civil society and the food supply chain (Lang, 2005). We shall refer to these as “actors” in relation to policy development and implementation throughout this paper (Lusch and Vargo, 2014). At present, these three actors do not interact well. Vivid examples of poor interactions include the lobbying efforts of the food and beverages industry to undermine policies that protect public health (Ludwig and Nestle, 2008), and public-private partnerships being criticised for suffering from fundamental differences of interest, power imbalances and conflicted objectives between actors (Lund-Thomsen, 2009; Hawkes and Buse, 2011; Aschemann-Witzel *et al*., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed the ineffectiveness of food policies and how the different food system actors operate and react to develop and adapt food policies (iPES FOOD, 2020).

To propose solutions we followed McGuire’s (2012) suggestion that research on the topic of health policy implementation should adopt a marketing rather than public management perspective, as well as Aschemann-Witzel et al.’s (2012) evidence that food and health policy development can learn from marketing theory and concepts. Trischler and Charles (2019) also suggest adopting a service ecosystems approach to public policy development. Therefore, in this paper we apply a relational marketing framework to the nutrition policy system as a whole, aiming to understand the impact of trust, power and collaboration among the food system actors on effective nutrition policy development. This relational thinking approach “can enable a closer consideration of the relations and interactions among food marketers, nutritional experts and regulators, by identifying and assessing relations and stakeholders” (Bech-Larsen and Aschemann-Witzel, 2012, p. 209).

The study focuses on the nutrition policy of Greece. Greece has among the highest obesity rates in Europe and worldwide, with 17% of adults being obese and 40% of children aged 6-9 years being overweight or obese (OECD, 2017a; World Health Organisation, 2018), showing that the existing nutrition policy framework is not very effective, even in a location famed for its healthy Mediterranean diet. To draw a holistic understanding of the food policy system, and achieve the research objectives, our research was designed to gain perspectives from each nutrition policy actor.

# **LITERATURE REVIEW**

## **2.1 Current actors within nutrition policy development**

Lang (1999) pays attention to the issue of where power lies within the food system affecting policy decision making. In 2005 he proposed a triangle model to describe, in a simplified manner, the way in which food policies (including nutrition policies) are developed, based on the interaction among three power groups, i.e., governments, food supply chains and civil society (see Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Commercial interests have tended to dominate within each of these three areas even when a stakeholder approach is adopted, leading to a power asymmetry (Carey *et al.*, 2016; Brooks *et al.*, 2017; Aschemann-Witzel *et al.*, 2018). Since the strong lobbying power of the big food corporations does not always allow for interest-free decision making (Carey *et al.*, 2016; Baker *et al.*, 2018) it is unsurprising that nutrition-related diseases data shows that governments have indeed been weak (Roberto *et al.*, 2015; Swinburn *et al.*, 2019).

Yet, due to its regulatory power, a government can intervene in any of the food supply chain stages, from production and imports to the final consumer, ostensibly to protect the rights of citizens and the public good (Meadowcroft, 2007). Indeed, governments are tasked with creating policy to improve citizen health and wellbeing. So, what is making them so ineffective? What may be needed is to develop a key role for another actor in the process: civil society’s input is needed to hold the different actors accountable for their actions (Swinburn *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, we consider that consumers could be usefully re-conceptualised as citizens (as a subset of the wider civil society) in their role as actors in policy development. Historically, in contrast, the context of policy formulation is to focus on policy content as the core (Walt and Gilson, 1994) to be passively received by consumers understood merely as passive end-users.

Citizens are conceptualised as active members of the community interested in public affairs and societal welfare, while customers in the consumer marketing literature are mainly driven by individualistic motives to get the best deal at a series of discrete points in time (Berglund and Matti, 2006). We, therefore, included “citizens” in the research design and adopted a marketing approach where a longer-term focus on developing relationships shows how interactions among actors across the whole food system can be conceptualised in such a way as to lead to more effective policy formulation.

## **2.2 A relational marketing approach for nutrition policy development**

Relational marketing is defined as “all marketing activities directed towards establishing, developing and maintaining successful relational exchanges” (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 22). Milne et al. (1996) argue for public policy makers shifting from a predominantly supervisor role to a relationship-building one. Hence, we introduce relational marketing as a concept for framing more constructive policy development processes that could result in better implementation. Relational marketing concepts such as “cooperation”, “trust”, “power” and “value-in-use” are central to consciously building long-term relationships and will be briefly discussed here.

Cooperation implies that both sides are working to achieve the best solution, with coordinated efforts producing outcomes better than one firm will achieve alone (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Doney and Cannon, 1997). This can reflect power imbalances and be experienced as a restriction. We discuss this element below, along with power and power asymmetry. Trust is an expectation about an exchange partner that results from the partner's expertise, reliability and intentionality (Ganesan, 1994), and it needs to be actively built during a relationship (Halliday, 2008). This reciprocal arrangement, with rights and duties, is particularly relevant due to the decline in public trust in governments that has been witnessed around the world, leading to worries about gaining public support for policy implementation (Johnson and Scicchitano, 2000). To know how to create such an arrangement it is also important to investigate what would facilitate relationship development within the whole system (Singh *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, our first research objective is:

*(RO1) to investigate whether there might be potential to enhance collaboration and trust among the actors in nutrition policy development, to in turn enhance policy effectiveness.*

Cooperation results in acknowledged interdependence but the vulnerability then sensed means that there is a negative to be addressed, known as power asymmetry, as in practice one actor can overbalance into dependence on another and experience power as negative cooperation and as the antithesis of trust (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Doney and Cannon 1997). Power is often discussed as the property of a thing, and it can be understood as the ability to get what one wants (Pratto, 2016); more usually it is seen as power over another, such as the ability of one partner to coerce the other into doing something they otherwise might not do (Wilson, 1995). Thus, the focus is on power asymmetry. Yet, power not only explains but also produces relationships (Foucault, 1991).Therefore, our second and third research objectives are:

*(RO2) to investigate who has the power in the current system, and*

*(RO3) to explore whether a power shift might be needed to develop effective nutrition polices and if so, from and to which actors.*

Policy development processes that bolster the otherwise passive, dependent recipients of expertise by treating them as “citizens” able to create value in their own terms could balance the power asymmetry. What Carr (2006) posits is that categories of actors, such as members of society, are not merely fixed recipients of policy. Policies are continuously constructed whilst they are being delivered and put into practice. For all actors are working out the value their actions are creating for them, rather than simply accepting guidance. This indicates that subjective meaning, the actual value-in-use in the beneficiary’s mind, needs to be engaged with by policy makers. For, taking a relationship marketing perspective, all actors in the system will be creating value-in-use from the relationship (Grönroos, 2004), rather than receiving value embedded by the process. The emphasis on value-in-use (Lusch *et al.*, 2007; Lusch and Vargo 2014) lends itself to a focus on the dynamic use made of, in our case, nutrition policy, by citizens, rather than on the passive role of consumers purchasing value embedded in food products. Our fourth research objective, therefore, is:

*(RO4) to investigate to what extent nutrition policy development processes focus on outcomes oriented towards citizens.*

Models of strategic alliances from the relational marketing literature offer more than just “competitive advantage” and “making profits” (Varadarajan and Cunningham, 1995). Such models could be usefully applied in the area of partnerships in the food policy system as they have been in the areas of partnerships in local government (Rees and Gardner, 2003) and the not-for-profit sector (McCort, 1994). We acknowledge that this relational marketing holistic approach is surely influenced by the reach of ecology from natural sciences into many other areas, such as services marketing (Ng, 2018) and health promotion (McLeroy *et al.*, 1988).

There is an opportunity, therefore, for relational marketing, by means of the key concepts of cooperation, trust and value-in-use, acknowledging in particular the notion of power as asymmetrical, to be of assistance in the implementation of food policy. Milne et al. (1996, p. 214) suggest that defining shared goals would lead to greater success in influencing governments and they warn that: “adversarial models of public policy pitting the non-profit, government and business sectors against one another are not relevant [anymore]”.

# **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative research methodology was adopted to explore perspectives on the relevance of relational approaches to connections across the food system in order to answer the four research questions. We ask questions about current nutrition policies, how the system works and how it should work for better outcomes, prompting discussion on issues of trust, cooperation, value (as perceived benefits) and power in policy decision-making.

The aim is for a realist understanding of the whole system of nutrition policy development. This permits “thick” description, as is appropriate in this early exploration of multiple actor-sets. The focus is on socially constructed realities in nutrition policy development. This focus gives social science a role not only to, on occasion, predict, but also to seek out generative mechanisms so as to explain and then enable - even promote - change. So, we take the critical realist approach that the real world is out there but that facts are not clearly, objectively, distinct from perception and therefore, that data collection and analysis require interpretation (Sayer, 1992). To achieve this, two methods were adopted to enable exploratory understanding of the nutrition policy terrain: focus groups to capture citizens’ views and semi-structured interviews for food system actors.

To gain citizens’ perspectives focus groups were used to investigate whether they experienced a citizen-focus within current nutrition policies, their interactions with food system actors, their trust in these different actors, and their recommendations for changes to how nutrition policies might be shaped and implemented so that citizens embrace them. Fifty-nine young adults, 18-26 years old, participated in nine focus groups of 5-8 participants each. The selection of this target audience was designed to sample the perspectives of those who represent the future of the country, who would face any consequences of current initiatives while at the same time possibly driving policy decisions in the future.

According to Dalton (2005, p. 149), "better educated youth […] serve as opinion leaders on politics, and are more likely to be politically active" and this is why we recruited young adults who were either undertaking or had completed vocational or tertiary education. In order to increase the degree of representativeness efforts were made during the recruitment process to balance the following factors: gender, age, annual income and place they grew up (big/small city, town or village). Focus groups were selected because they allow investigation not only of people's knowledge, attitudes and experiences but also their perceptions, feelings and opinions and how those opinions are constructed, helping to reveal influential factors in complicated and multifaceted behaviours (Carson *et al*., 2001). The duration of the focus groups varied between 55 and 90 minutes. The data were coded by two researchers (Silverman, 2013) and the Cohen’s Kappa coefficient for inter-rate reliability was .921.

In addition to the focus groups 30 in-depth interviews were carried out with actors across the food policy triangle (see Figure 1), including government representatives, members of the food supply chain and civil society agencies. Semi-structured interviews are appropriate when the objective is to collect data from specialists to enable them to express their experience in a field and comment on similar issues (Silverman, 2013).

Purposeful judgment sampling was used based on participants’ involvement in key initiatives and key policy formation regarding nutritional issues (see Table 1). Respondent choices led to 14 interviews conducted face-to-face and 16 by telephone. The interview length ranged from 10 to 75 minutes and they were audio-recorded, having gained interviewee consent. The discussions were around current nutrition policy in Greece with a focus on relationships across all actors in the food system, around issues of power and trust, and around any recommendations for more effective policy development and implementation.

All the participants were informed about their anonymity indemnity and no incentive was provided. Written consent forms were signed and collected before each group and individual interview. Ethics approval was sought from the Research Degrees Committee at City University London, UK and from the ethics committee of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece.

**[Insert Table 1 about here]**

A thematic analysis of the transcripts was carried out based on the main themes of the relational thinking theoretical framework but also on emerging themes from the findings (see Table 2 for the key themes and subthemes). Two researchers coded the data independently and resolved any disagreements through discussion. The inter-coder reliability using Cohen’s Kappa coefficient was measured at .87.

# **RESULTS**

Thematic analysis of the transcripts from the 30 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders and the nine focus groups with citizens yielded six themes, as shown in detail in Table 2, grouped by the two areas (main themes) identified in the literature: interdependence and power asymmetry. Results from the fieldwork are grouped under these two main themes, because they are areas of criticality that would warrant a relational approach to future effective nutrition policy development as supported by the theoretical framework.

## **4.1 Interdependence**

Four subthemes were identified under the interdependence umbrella and included discussions on (i) how the different actors focus (or not) on citizens’ wellbeing, (ii) how the different food system actors cooperate (or not), (iii) the conflicts among the food system actors, and (iv) trust among the different food system actors (see Table 2 for sample quotes).

In the focus groups citizens were not very satisfied with current nutrition policies in Greece. They felt that the government did not really care about their needs. They trusted neither the government, because of its “ineffectiveness”, nor the food industry, because of its profit-driven motives, but they believed in the “pure motives” of the non-governmental organisations. Citizens reported that individuals needed more support from the government to adopt healthier eating habits and they called for changes in order to create more supportive environments.

*A leading policy must be created in order to improve eating habits, which will include advertisements for healthy foodstuffs and the development of governmental organisations which will promote healthy eating* ***[citizen 2nd focus group].***

This support often required better monitoring of the industry and stronger legislation, revealing citizen perceptions of the power of food industry actors over government initiatives. For example, two participants reported:

*The state must control the middlemen […] support the producers […] so that consumers can buy healthy products at reasonable prices* ***[citizen 6th focus group].***

*The state must make it more difficult to open a fast-food store and facilitate the establishment of healthy food outlets* ***[citizen 8th focus group].***

In terms of cooperation and conflicts, participants identified many areas of collaboration among all the three sectors but asked for better inter- and intra-sectoral collaboration and coordination, better support from the government and less conflict; they saw the importance of having a shared goal of citizen wellbeing. Importantly, they believed that without collaboration and cooperation there could be no effective nutrition policy. Many participants highlighted the importance of support and coordination of these efforts by the government as the lynchpin among the stakeholders (Table 2 provides example quotes that support all these views). For example, an NGO manager and a governmental employee said:

*Many times, we have common objectives with other agents. In general, there are many agents who do different things on the same subject and maybe this results in higher expenditure […] If we cooperated, or if the government coordinated all these efforts, the cost would be lower* ***[NGO manager].***

*If the involved agents cooperated things would be better in the nutrition sector. The relationships between the responsible services should be better in terms of the division of work and responsibilities. There is a need for better coordination* ***[Governmental body for control and advising employee].***

The importance of collaboration among the actors involved in micronutrient policy development was also highlighted as a crucial determinant of its success in a study among 10 European countries (Jeruszka-Bielak *et al.*, 2015).

The interviews revealed ineffective nutrition policies, frequent lack of governmental support, and an urgent need for many inter-governmental changes and improvements to lead to better policy development and implementation. This need for change is reflected in the quote of a participant who said:

*…the best solution is to get three- four people from different bodies that are interested in healthy eating policies and who really want to collaborate and coordinate these initiatives [that promote healthy eating behaviours]. This is the only way to have something good and organised* ***[Ministry of Food and Rural Development employee]****.*

Participants from civil society, including citizens and government officials, did not trust the private food sector, particularly the big corporations, as they perceived its motives to be profit- rather than citizen-driven.

*[Food companies’] work is based on demand and profits and they can deceive us in order to make profits* ***[Citizen 6th focus group].***

Participants believed, therefore, that the government, with the support of civil society, should monitor the food supply chain and ensure policy development based on citizens’ needs rather than private/commercial interests. However, this clinging to the need for monitoring indicates how a lack of trust drives actors away from mutually beneficial relationships.

These findings are somewhat expected given that they reflect citizens’ deeply rooted – negative - beliefs towards the government and corporations (Harrington, 2017). However, what was interesting was that participants mainly blamed the government for how companies operate in the food system. They believed that, regardless of how socially responsible companies may (or may not) be, it was the government’s role to protect citizens from companies’ unethical behaviour, such as unhealthy food and misleading/ manipulating promotion messages, rather than blaming the companies themselves for not paying equal attention to profits and social wellbeing.

*Man: the state should protect people from the food industry, which provides products that can harm our health.*

*Woman 1: I agree, and also the state should organise initiatives to promote healthy eating.*

*Woman 2: some foods are expensive, like fish, so the government must ensure that these products are available at reasonable prices...* ***[Citizens 1st focus group].***

## **4.2 Power asymmetry**

Under the second overarching theme of power, participants discussed two main areas (subthemes): (i) current power in the food system and (ii) power shifts. Examples of detailed quotes to support these areas can be found in Table 2.

There was wide agreement among the civil society, government and citizens participants that the power lies in the hands of the few big players in the food industry, which is in line with research in this area (Ludwig and Nestle, 2008; Carey *et al.*, 2016; Brooks *et al.*, 2017; Swinburn *et al.* 2019). For example, one citizen reported:

*The food industry is powerful, and someone has to arbitrate* ***[Citizen 8th focus group].***

It was also acknowledged that this power has been concentrated there because of a lack of governance, which has also been identified as a big challenge around the world by the World Economic Forum (2017).

*The government cannot effectively control the food industry as there isn’t the right legislative framework* ***[Member of a scientific association].***

*The main weakness of the state is the inspecting mechanisms. The market is not controlled at all…* ***[Member of a food production trade association].***

When participants were asked if they preferred to leave policy development to market forces they reported that this could be “catastrophic for citizens” and that the government should take the lead. They did, however, propose adopting a private sector “think of the state as an enterprise” approach in terms of managing and organising policy development and implementation. Smaller food producers’ representatives also supported the government and civil society perceptions about the power of the big food corporations and retailers.

*No, no private involvement because their interests are not pure, so we must not allow them to take the lead. I understand that when funding is not sufficient interventions often get private sponsors such as food companies [the interviewee gave examples here off the record] but it is better if they don’t take the lead because they only care for their own financial interests* ***[NGO manager].***

All civil society participants (state organisations and citizens) agreed that power is currently weighted towards the private food sector but they asked for the government to reclaim this power and, with appropriate reforms, take the lead in effective policy development that enhances citizen wellbeing.

*During the economic crisis there has been an increase of unhealthy foodstuffs consumption and the food industry is going to take advantage of this situation. So, the state must intervene to discourage this trend* ***[Member of a scientific association].***

Food industry representatives did not provide a direct answer to the question about food corporations’ power and its impact on shaping eating trends. The answers were related to the free will of the citizen, “we listen to the market” ***[Food manufacturer],*** and food industry openness to supporting and designing initiatives to promote healthy eating as part of their corporate social responsibility, which has been repeatedly accused of being just a marketing exercise (Fleming and Jones, 2013).

*We have developed a programme for children 5-12 years of age in schools in the seven big cities in Greece in order to promote healthy eating habits. It contains educational material for 32 educational hours for children, teachers and parents* ***[Food manufacturer].***

Participants representing the food supply chain agreed that they were ahead of the government: “we are one step ahead of the government because our antennas are more sensitive towards the market messages” ***[Member of a food production trade association].*** They also reported that they did whatever they could to support NGOs and the government in promoting healthier eating habits as part of their corporate social responsibility. For example:

*As regards the nutritional aspects of our initiatives, we cooperate with universities and nutritionists. Also, non-profit organisations and the Ministry of Health have approached us in order to have us support their initiatives for healthy eating promotion and we support them because our mission is to support these actions* ***[Manager of a big supermarket].***

The unclear position of the food industry was raised by a civil servant who collaborates with the food industry as part of his role.

*[The food industry] is good only in words but when they have to take action they do not have a clear position* ***[Ministry of Agriculture employee].***

More example quotes to support the different themes discussed above can be found in Table 2.

**[Insert Table 2 about here]**

# **DISCUSSION**

Three overarching areas emerged as we interpreted and shared meanings arising from the data to draw conclusions that would aid more effective nutrition policy development and implementation. Firstly, collaboration is being impeded by tensions in policy development, which call for greater acknowledgement of interdependence. Secondly, issues of cooperation and trust are relevant and need to be seen in the context of the salience of power asymmetry. Finally, there is a clear need for a shared citizen focus and, to achieve this, a need for a shift in power across the food system. These areas underline the pressing need for governments to implement changes.

Our results drive a new model (Figure 2) for expressing how this dynamism and shared focus on citizens in developing and implementing nutrition policy might look if this critical step-change towards real collaboration were enacted among and between the four actors in nutrition policy development. For more effective nutrition policy development there must be a shift from a model that focuses on the tensions between independent actors (Figure 1) to a model that focuses on collaboration across interdependent actors with the shared goal of citizen wellbeing (Figure 2).

**[Insert Figure 2 about here]**

Figure 2 shows a development in nutrition policy practice. The ecological model of health promotion has the individual at the centre due to its focus on behaviour change (McLeroy *et al.*, 1988), while Figure 2 suggests that citizens should be at the centre of policy formulation. Our model does not focus on individual behaviour change but instead has a shared focus on citizens’ well-being, using this to inform policy development processes across the system as a whole. Nevertheless, an important similarity between the two models is that they both advocate for active involvement of the target population – health promotion activities are key for the ecological health promotion approach, and participation in policy formulation is key for the relational approach. The relational approach adds a sustained focus on connection by means of relationship building. Intentional trust-building is enabled across the system by means of practical collaboration in developing shared goals in a co-creation process that can then build from trust in the system to commitment to policy outcomes. Our model depicts a possible reality for nutrition policy development, with the actors interacting within a dynamic of power such that together they co-construct and implement policies. Relational thinking includes an understanding of "sick rather than healthy relationships" (Young and Wilkinson, 1989, p. 109), and so does not lead to simple naïve optimism but rather to sober discussion of power asymmetry and trade-offs around acknowledged shared interests and longer-term goals.

It is noteworthy that ideological differences between political parties can lead them to prioritise different approaches to achieving their nutrition policy goals; citizens’ ideologies can lead to varying value perceptions and acceptance of different policies (Lusk, 2012; Cullerton *et al.*, 2016). This is all acknowledged within the relational marketing concept of “value-in-use” ([Grönroos, 2004](#_ENREF_22" \o "Grönroos, 2004 #254)). Therefore, similarly to marketing ecosystems, in the policy context nutrition policy actors need to develop a shared goal together. This will be arrived at, to be sure, via explicit compromise. This shared goal will ensure the development and implementation of effective nutrition policy, regardless of ideological backgrounds, since current divides have clearly been proved ineffective. Trischler and Charles (2019) suggest that governments should map the value-creation process and capture how value is co-created between actors with often different interests. This includes identifying the compromises that need to be made by the various actors to achieve the shared goal. Cullerton et al. (2016) highlight that public mobilisation and strategical targeting of decision makers who embrace the shared goal can enable nutrition policy change. So, while ideological differences may lead to different policy approaches and explain most of the competing views, the identification of a shared goal of citizen health and wellbeing across all the actors could lead to more effective policy development.

Our findings suggest that there is, indeed, potential for more intentional and positive collaboration within the whole system. The literature indicated and the findings corroborated that, for these collaborations to happen, actors, despite their ideological backgrounds, must have similar long-term objectives in order to be able to pursue mutual gains (Milne *et al.*, 1996), which in this case could be citizen health and wellbeing. These collaborations need to include “citizens” as some kind of construction and representation of “society” in order to develop policies focused on improving citizen wellbeing, and so gain the citizen buy-in that might lead to policies becoming effective. It is this buy-in that could provide a powerful counterbalance to the power of large food corporations in formal discussions of policy.

## **5.1 A sense of interdependence needed in the development of nutrition policy**

Interdependence is broken by the perception of pressing power asymmetry and negative collaboration by a dominant actor in the system acting without citizen health and wellbeing as a focus. This perceived dominance is then actively and even passively resisted as our respondents do not trust the agents of change: either the government or private organisations. This lack of trust is a key barrier to individuals making the effort to change behaviours that is necessary for effective implementation of nutrition policies.

Many citizens complained about the lack of governmental support in developing new habits, leading to the dilution of their intention to change what they ate. Johnson and Scicchitano (2000) also found this link between trust and willingness to take action and showed that policymakers need to build public support if they want their policies to be embraced by citizens. The missing player can again be seen to be the constructed and articulate “citizen”. Trust in governmental institutions is a key indicator of the quality of government–public relationships (Hong *et al.*, 2012). Low trust levels lead recipients or beneficiaries to not accept policies in practice (OECD, 2017b); this lack of acceptance stems from low levels of commitment (Moorman *et al.*, 1993).

Our findings add finesse to a growing argument regarding the role of government pro-activity: to orchestrate the players (Tonkin *et al.,* 2018) and focus on citizen wellbeing as the long-term output. As mentioned, a previous study across 10 European countries found that in northern European countries, where nutrition policies were successful, governments were actively involved in policy development and there was also strong consumer interest in policy development participation. In contrast, in southern European countries, including Greece, a lack of governmental initiative and commitment to micronutrient policy development was reported (Jeruszka-Bielak *et al.*, 2015).

Therefore, we see that citizen participation in policy making and implementation increases engagement and trust in governments (Hong *et al*., 2012) and therefore commitment, leading to the concept of co-creation reflected in our new model (Figure 2). Tonkin et al. (2018) found that consumer moral concern over food matters was not responded to by governments. Yet, it is the very complexity of interconnected relational concepts such as trustworthiness that make it so very difficult for governments to effectively implement their policies even if these are for citizens’ good (Keele, 2007). So, this paper supports those who have drawn attention to the need to focus on interactions between groups of actors and the important role for civil society in the effective implementation of policies (Kingdon, 2010).

Interestingly, despite the lack of trust in the government shown by most of the food system actors and citizens, our participants highlighted that the government should take the lead, although as a connector between the other actors rather than as a mere regulator. So, for the development and effective implementation of food policies, interdependence needs to be recognised. Also, for this recognition to be real there needs to be a power shift within and across the whole food system.

## **5.2 Power Asymmetry Issues in the Development of Nutrition Policy**

Formally, in Greece, power is given to the government; however, in practice, here as elsewhere, there is a perceived lack of power due to the strength of large corporations. This was reported by participants from civil society, the government and the less powerful actors of the food supply chain. Our finding that larger food corporations have dominant power over the government, and that there is lack of effective monitoring and accountability systems, supports previous evidence of the power asymmetry within the food system (Dahlberg, 2001; Caraher *et al.*, 2013; Swinburn *et al.,* 2019).

Overt power is useful for influencing decision making in order to favour positive outcomes, from shaping consumer needs to framing social and political issues (Dahlberg, 2001; Pelletier *et al.*, 2003). In our study, larger firms are seen to have undue influence. This is reflected, among others, by Hendrickson and Heffernan (2002, p. 358), who note that "since economic power does translate into political power, many of the economic and regulatory structures of the food system are weighted in favour of these firms". So, research participants raised the issue of governmental reforms in order to increase effectiveness in nutrition policy development and implementation.

## **5.3 Citizen focus and power shift needed in the development of nutrition policy**

Given this power asymmetry, we argue that there is a pressing need for a power shift. This shift would mean governments taking on a more active role than merely monitoring and citizens taking on a more active role than merely being the end users of policy, for power is constructed by and constructs relationships among actors in the food system. The system needs citizens consciously using citizen power.

Calabrese (2017, p. 3) has noted that “the rhetoric of choice is a principal means through which consumers are told that the regulation of the food industry on their behalf is how the state attempts to undermine their sovereign power”. However, this claim needs critiquing and citizenship promoted over consumer choice. This requires governmental organisations and civil society to collaborate and strengthen their relationships to counterbalance corporations. Lyson and Raymer (2000, p. 207) suggest that this power imbalance requires that "researchers, policy makers, and activists monitor, analyse, and report on the corporations and officials who sit on top of today’s global food and agricultural system". Importantly, we take this further by suggesting co-creation rather than relying on analysis and reporting post-facto.

Swinburn et al. (2019) call for stronger national and international governance levers to fully implement policies and Lang (2005, p. 127) also discusses the need for pro-activity by governments in shaping nutrition policies:

*Even within market theory, whose purest ideologues propose that food is or ought to be subject to market forces, and whose policy central tenet is to restrict the role of the state or remove it altogether, the relationship between the supply chain and civil society/consumers is in fact mediated or framed by the state*.

Hawkes and Buse (2011) recommend the development of public-private partnerships only after policy makers take the lead to set public health objectives. Our respondents all recommended that by reducing bureaucracy and actively taking a lead government organisations could reform nutrition policy making by focusing on citizen wellbeing. Interestingly, this is not to suggest a firmer monitoring role. So, based on the research findings, governments need to move from a transactional-electioneering approach to a relational thinking framework (O’Malley and Tynan, 2000) that focuses on their connecting power; their empowering of the citizen voice.

Given the lack of trust evident in our findings, shared ownership of policy requires developing a shared focus on citizen wellbeing. This is as distinct from blaming individuals for not changing. Failure in the system to deliver the desired outcomes of improved citizen health and wellbeing is often blamed on consumers as somewhat passive end users; that is, on the individuals prone to disease and suffering ill-health through, for example, becoming overweight (Witkowski, 2007).

Our model (Figure 2) does not overlook any inevitable tension and conflict but keeps the citizen at the centre of every decision. This relational approach would facilitate the development of appropriate policies to promote and support healthy eating behaviours through the interaction of all actors, since value is co-created within interactive processes (Grönroos, 2006). This interaction will add value to citizens (healthy lives/wellbeing), stakeholders (higher profits, fewer healthcare expenses, increased trust among the citizens/voters/consumers), and society (wellbeing, sustainability, local production and economic development, environmental protection). It would also mean that a strong accountability system is in place (Swinburn *et al.*, 2019).

# **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

We conclude that in the policy development context there should be a power shift based on a relational marketing approach acknowledging the interdependence of all policy actors. Our findings demonstrate that conflict and the presence of dominant power in the system concern almost all the participants. Reallocation of power within nutrition policy development is, therefore, crucial. This could happen best through an intentional focus on developing a shared goal of citizen wellbeing. For this to happen consumers need to consider themselves less as passive receivers of consumer goods and services and more as active citizens, co-creating their health and wellbeing, conscious of being members of civil society.

Our findings suggest a need for governments to lead in nutrition policy creation. Yet, the findings indicate many governmental weaknesses. This is clearly problematic. We model how a greater balance of power could be achieved through iterative interaction and government action by reducing food supply chain power and increasing government participation. So, our study enriches policy formation theory by focusing on the whole system at the same time to ensure policy develops holistically, addressing power imbalance and ensuring governments hold actors to account. The overall policy implication is that it is vital for governments to create the context for the development of collaborative relationships among actors: the government, the food supply chain and civil society. This role for governments is more important than overt regulatory power.

We identified two key implications for theory relating to the application of relationship thinking to nutrition policy development. One implication, from a theoretical perspective, is the need to see nutrition policy development as a set of stakeholders with the potential both to create and destroy value-in-use for themselves and across the system. Relational marketing encourages an understanding of the importance of re-balancing power asymmetries for the common good within the system. The second implication is that we need to develop a more nuanced understanding of relational dynamics such that actors commit to moving towards a more interconnected, interdependent approach as they create relationships, focused on a shared goal of creating citizen wellbeing.

Our overall contribution is to stress that shared goals need co-creation by all actors. This is the needed change in state-civil society-food supply chain relations. Policy makers should initiate relational processes as part of their approach to policy creation in order to increase whole system trust and cooperation and create the context for citizen buy-in.

To move from the status quo where it is widely perceived that large corporations wield too much power whilst governments are weak requires a power-shift. Our pyramid model (Figure 2) shows bi-directional relationships that are acknowledged as part of power dynamics, open to being better balanced between all four actors; we indicate this dynamism with two-way arrows. To facilitate this shift structural changes to enhance communication, collaboration and better organisation within governmental bodies are required. They need to play the crucial role in the process of flexing connecting power, rather than thinking of the government role as mere governance.

# **LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

Our study has a few limitations that may open up avenues for future research. The citizen sample consisted of educated young adults as these are more likely to get involved in politics and consequently shape future food policies. However, this may be a limitation of our study as it does not include the views of older and less educated people whose opinions may also be important to policy formulation. To overcome this limitation we made sure that we recruited people from various socio-economic backgrounds and types of education. Similar future studies could consider a broader sample of citizens to better understand how different groups could influence food policies and how they could be more engaged to play an active role in policy development; an inclusive policy development approach may require inclusivity of various views. Moreover, this study focuses on one food policy pillar, i.e., nutrition policies. While many aspects we identified around policy formulation, such as collaboration among actors, citizen engagement with policy development, power asymmetry and trust in policy actors, can have an impact across these pillars, it would be interesting for future studies to investigate if other food policy areas face similar or different challenges. This would help to develop a better understanding of the factors that lead to food policy success as a whole.

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