

Perspectives on the agricultural policy process

Agricultural policy has provided fertile ground for testing ideas about the policy-making process. There is an extensive literature in which a variety of theoretical approaches are applied to case studies in countries such as the UK, France, Ireland, Denmark, Canada and the USA. Working in this tradition, this account sets empirical material within a framework – or conceptual torch – that illuminates the workings of a complex policy sector. As Moyer and Josling note, the ‘complexity of public policy in agriculture poses a challenge for those who wish to understand it. A degree of simplification is necessary in order not to get lost in the detail, but too simple an account misses much of the flavour of the policy. What is needed is a structure, a framework, on which to hang the detail’ (1990: 3).

Stages and policies

The policy stages device provides the organising spine to facilitate cross-national comparison throughout the agricultural policy process. In this perspective the policy process is broken down into a number of sequences flowing from the existing policy environment through to implementation, with a feedback loop closing the cycle (see Figure 2.1). In their account of agricultural policy reform in the 1980s, for example, Moyer and Josling focus on agenda-setting, how issues are perceived and handled, what options are developed, how decisions are made, what factors are influential, how outcomes can be explained, and why some initiatives succeed whilst others fail (1990: 17–18). The stages considered in this assessment are the policy environment, agenda-setting, formulation and finally policy implementation (including enforcement and evaluation). These provide the main elements of the policy process where differentiation can be found, although this is likely to vary at each stage.

The starting point is the ‘policy environment’, made up from the structural conditions of agricultural sectors, socio-cultural understandings about food, farming and rural life, past policy histories and the existing suite of

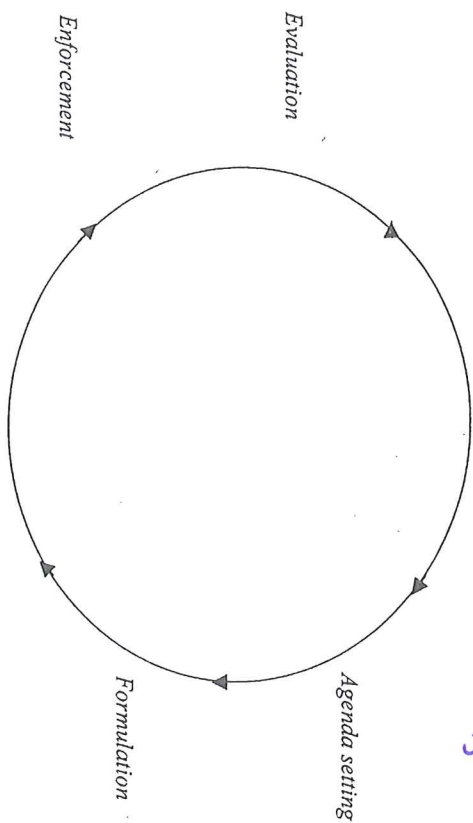


Figure 2.1 The agricultural policy cycle

programmes. All these feed into demands for policy change (or continuity), the emergence of new themes, or the re-emergence of old concerns. This process of ‘agenda-setting’ also prioritises certain issues, either as a result of purposeful action by policy actors, the influence of external forces, or as a consequence of unexpected events or crises. Taken together, the combination of different policy environments, agendas and preferences influence ‘policy formulation’ where a variety of agricultural policies are developed that are focused on the particular requirements of different countries. In the process of ‘implementation’ these policies have to be put into practice, usually taking the form of programmes and schemes that utilise several mechanisms such as regulation and funding. ‘Enforcement’ includes systems of monitoring to ensure that resources are being spent properly and regulations complied with. ‘Evaluation’ then involves the assessment of the effects and impact of policy action, judged against the objectives set at the outset. Policy change and its effects, either radical or gradual, in turn reshape the policy environment within which subsequent policies are developed.

Critics argue that the stages approach presents an artificial picture of the policy process, identifying weaknesses such as empirical inaccuracy, top-down bias, and the assumption of a single policy cycle (Sabatier 1999; John 1998). Policies do not have clearly distinguishable beginnings, middles and ends. Events, as Kingdon points out, ‘do not proceed neatly in stages, steps, or phases’ and the ‘advocacy of solutions often precedes the highlighting of problems to which they become attached. Agendas are not first set and then

alternatives generated' (1995: 205). Obviously the reality of the agricultural policy process is much more messy and complex than the idealised picture suggests. Agendas are continuously being shaped and prioritised. The boundary between formulation and implementation is fuzzy, highlighted in 'bottom-up' approaches where policies are altered in the process of application (Hill and Hupé 2002). Are, for example, the development of national agri-environment programmes best interpreted as national policy formulation or as the implementation of an EU directive (see Buller *et al.* 2000 and Chapter 7 of this volume)? Implementation is not simply a technical exercise where stated policy objectives are translated into outputs and outcomes. Objectives are not always clearly stated and values intrude. Evaluation is also a crucial part of the policy formulation process, when prospective actions are assessed for their likely consequences and impacts, for example through pilot schemes.

Nonetheless, although it presents an idealised representation of the policy process, the stages approach does help to identify the main areas for consideration. It is useful precisely because policy-making is messy and continuous, for it provides a way to organise a comparative account of the complex agricultural policy process. As one of its main advocates argues, it provides 'a basis for viewing and categorising actors and actions in ways that help unravel and elucidate given policies' (de Leon 1999: 26).

An account of the agricultural policy process also must be linked to some interpretative perspective if it is to be more than thick institutional description. The starting point is the fuzzy notion of 'policy' itself. A basic distinction separates policies from issues and decisions. Although much policy-making begins with 'problem' recognition, the term 'issue' is preferable because it highlights conflict over values and resources, and incorporates opportunities as well as threats. Accordingly policies are the main responses to issues and the decisions flowing from them are the bricks from which programmes are constructed. Policy involves webs of decisions that are concerned with the allocation of values and norms, and which have consequences for the distribution of resources generally, not just of budgets. Agricultural policies are made up of collections of decisions that have been taken at several different territorial or functional levels, under the influence of a potentially wide range of policy actors, and that involve the play of power and the mobilisation of bias. So debates about encouraging organic farming or using agricultural policy to maintain the fabric of rural society are rooted in competing conceptions about the 'best' way to produce food and manage the land. Policy action, as contrasted with strategy, embodies the acceptance of certain values and the rejection of others and what then becomes important is the answer to questions such as whose values have informed policy choice? Why have these values been successful?

Agricultural and rural policies combine distributive, redistributive, regulatory and constituent types, and it is not unusual to find these mechanisms used for the same policy aim (Lowi 1972). Policy for the organic sector, for

example, combines subsidy arrangements for encouraging production with a regulatory framework governing allowable methods and the creation of particular organisational structures. More generally, the fusion of production and income support goals within the CAP makes it 'hard to separate the distributive and regulatory dimensions' (Rieger 2000: 182). In a number of areas agricultural policy is highly regulatory, for example in measures to combat animal diseases such as BSE and foot and mouth disease (FMD), the rules that govern organic food production, and cross-compliance standards for environmentally friendly farming. Yet despite greater reliance on regulation, especially in animal health and food safety, agricultural policy remains highly (re)distributive.

National agricultural policies, subsequently embodied in the CAP, historically had explicit allocative objectives, in particular securing food supplies and national security, pursued through mechanisms such as tariff barriers and production subsidies. However, agricultural policy also has a long history of redistributive aims, involving the redirection of general taxation receipts to the farming community, for example the deficiency payments subsidy system in the UK after the Second World War. Agricultural programmes are often viewed as social welfare policies for farmers, designed to protect incomes and living standards against market dislocation. George and Bache refer to the CAP as the first redistributive policy of the EU, informed by existing national support policies and a general presumption that some protection against an unrestrained free market was necessary (2001: 306–8). For Rieger, the CAP is 'an integral part of the west European welfare state' because its objectives include social security and distributive justice as well as economic rationality (2000: 182).

The trend away from price support to direct payments, linked increasingly to non-agricultural objectives, highlights the welfareist nature of contemporary agricultural policy and makes its redistributive character transparent. So Hix (1999) argues that the CAP is becoming a 'liberal welfare state regime' in which programmes are funded through taxation rather than high prices, and are directed more as welfare subsidies for low-income farmers. This is clearly evident in the national agricultural and rural policies of countries such as France, Ireland and Greece, which are explicitly designed to protect an important rural social milieu against the unrestrained forces of the market. Public resources are redistributed to underpin farm incomes and thereby retain as many farmers as possible on the land. An important corollary is that redistributive instruments give agrarian interest groups a 'critical political influence' (Rieger 2000: 185). Because farm subsidies are targeted on a small and declining section of society, producers defend them vigorously and accordingly 'retrenchment' is as difficult in agriculture as in other areas of welfare policy (Coleman, Atkinson and Montpetit 1997).

There are several facets to the distributive impact of agricultural policy. The effect of redistributing resources to farmers from consumers and tax-

payers through price support instruments and high prices is regressive because they disproportionately disadvantage the poorest consumer. Agricultural policy at the supranational level has some progressive effects because it redistributes resources from richer to poorer countries where employment in the farming sector is still relatively high. In overall budgetary terms, Ireland, Greece and France all benefit from farm support, and the UK loses. Such patterns can be altered through policy reform, which may change the balance of priorities between production branches, or switch the emphasis from price support to direct subsidies. Within the agricultural sector, distribution effects arise because of differences between commodities and between farm businesses of different sizes, notably in the benefits that accrue to larger farmers and cereal growers. Although contentious, the common assertion that the richest 20 per cent of farmers receive 80 per cent of the benefits of farm support clearly highlights the potential distributive effects. This also was graphically illustrated by the debates in several countries about how the new single farm payment, agreed as part of the CAP reforms of 2003, should be allocated (see Chapter 7).

A multilevel agricultural policy process

The agricultural policy process is complex and fragmented. It involves different actors and institutions, operating at several different levels, using established standard operating rules and procedures. Agriculture is an example of what Coleman and Perl call an 'internationalised policy environment', an arena where 'at least some part of policy making takes place at a more encompassing level than the nation state' (1999: 700). Multilevel governance is one understanding of such a policy environment, which involves both vertical and horizontal co-ordination, and the dispersal of authority 'between levels of governance and amongst actors' (Rosamond 2000: 110). There is significant institutional development at international, supranational, national and regional levels, criss-crossed by the activities of actors such as politicians, bureaucrats and civil society actors. This account is primarily concerned with the role of national and sub-national actors in this multilevel system, but before developing the argument it is necessary to sketch out the supranational and international contexts, and the explanatory potential of the policy networks approach.

The international dimension

A variety of international actors play a key role in the agricultural policy process, the degree of interaction depending largely on the issues concerned. Bodies such as the G7/8 group of developed countries, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Bank and the United Nations are potentially important influences, particularly in setting the general political and ideological climate within which the agricultural

policy process operates. In the 1980s the major developed countries used the OECD 'as an initial forum in an attempt to address the growing farm crisis that developed at the end of the 1970s' (Coleman and Chiasson 2002: 175). By providing a systematic analysis of the links between international trade and agricultural policies, the OECD set the agenda for what emerged as the Uruguay Round of world trade liberalisation. Consequently agriculture has become a core element in world trade negotiations, thereby conferring a crucial role on the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in aspects of the policy process. Agricultural trade negotiations such as those under the rubric of the Doha Round take place in special sessions of the WTO Committee on Agriculture. The WTO also provides a forum for dispute settlement on matters such as bananas and growth hormones.

UN agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) provide a source of independent advice to governments on agricultural policy and development. In collaboration with the World Health Organisation (WHO), the FAO established the Codex Alimentarius Commission in 1962. This plays an increasingly vital, if not particularly transparent, role in agricultural policy, especially in the formulation, harmonisation and implementation of international food standards (Skogstad 2001). The influence of the code is found in other areas, such as organic production, the institutional architecture for food standards agencies and the WTO Agreements on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT). Taylor and Millar argue that the code 'has been especially influential in its attempts to establish food standards and codes of practice for hygiene and food technology' and that it has tried to use the SPS to 'develop further its international reference status on standards' (2002: 129).

Other relevant international actors include the Paris-based World Organisation for Animal Health (*Office International des Epizooties*, OIE). Established in the 1920s the OIE is especially important in the development of strategies and measures for disease prevention and control, particularly on FMD. In 1996 the first official OIE list of member countries that were FMD free without using vaccination was published. This was followed by the development of similar procedures for other diseases such as rinderpest and BSE. The OIE framework has a noticeable impact on the work of national and sub-national agriculture departments, and this is particularly evident in the approach of both the EU and national governments to the outbreaks of FMD in 2001. On BSE also, the Northern Ireland Executive was unable to justify a case for a relaxation of the beef export ban because the incidence of the disease exceeded the low-incidence criteria set by the OIE.

Clearly a number of international organisations are involved in debates about agricultural policy. Collective and consensual decision-making is the norm on the basis of multilateral negotiations between member governments. However, such organisations emphasise the technical process involved in setting standards, based on impartial scientific inquiry by inde-

pendent experts. Consequently they provide sites for the work of epistemic communities of scientific experts drawn from many different countries who share a common framework of analysis (Haas 1992). As such the work of international actors may buttress or undermine the policy stances taken by national actors. There are differences between countries over the weight and status to be accorded to expert 'scientific' advice. Whereas the UK stresses the importance of objective evidence, other countries such as France wish to draw upon a more varied range of socio-economic considerations such as the impact on small farmers, and see the 'precautionary principle' as central to a distinctive European approach. On growth hormones, for example, the UK and Ireland opposed a ban whereas France and the Netherlands were strongly in favour (Skogstad 2001: 491-2).

The supranational dimension

Although individual countries are the basic units of international organisations, the EU is a member of the WTO and the FAO, and has observer status in the Codex. This is hardly surprising given that agriculture historically has been the most important supranational policy domain. At this level the policy process centres on the relationship between national governments working through the Council of Ministers, the European Commission in the form of its agriculture directorate (DG Agriculture) and agricultural interest associations. Other institutions such as the Special Committee on Agriculture and the Management Committees are at the heart of day-to-day administration and implementation. Increasingly actors such as the European Parliament (EP) and non-farming interests play a role too (see Figure 2.2).

Such representations of the policy process usefully highlight the interactions between the main policy actors. In formal terms the Commission makes policy proposals but decisions are taken by the Council of Ministers. However, this tells us little about the balance of power between institutions. On this issue, this account shares state-centric assumptions about the dominance of national governments. Most importantly, national agriculture ministers are pivotal and the Agriculture Council is the 'focal point of decision-making on the CAP' (Grant 1997: 147). The Special Committee on Agriculture (SCA), which prepares the ground for Council meetings and fills in the details of policy decisions, has 'helped to preserve the pre-eminence of national interest in the policy process on agricultural matters' (Rieger 2000: 188). Whilst qualified majority voting (QMV) is the normal decision rule, the reality is intergovernmental bargaining and compromise, involving the construction of complex package deals. The policy process is 'largely a system of multilateral trade-offs between states, where national interest rules above all' (Chambers 1999: 99). The outcome of this intergovernmental bargaining, conducted under the influence of domestic political pressures, is often sub-optimal and produces largely incremental change that reflects the policy preferences of the most reluctant countries, even under majority

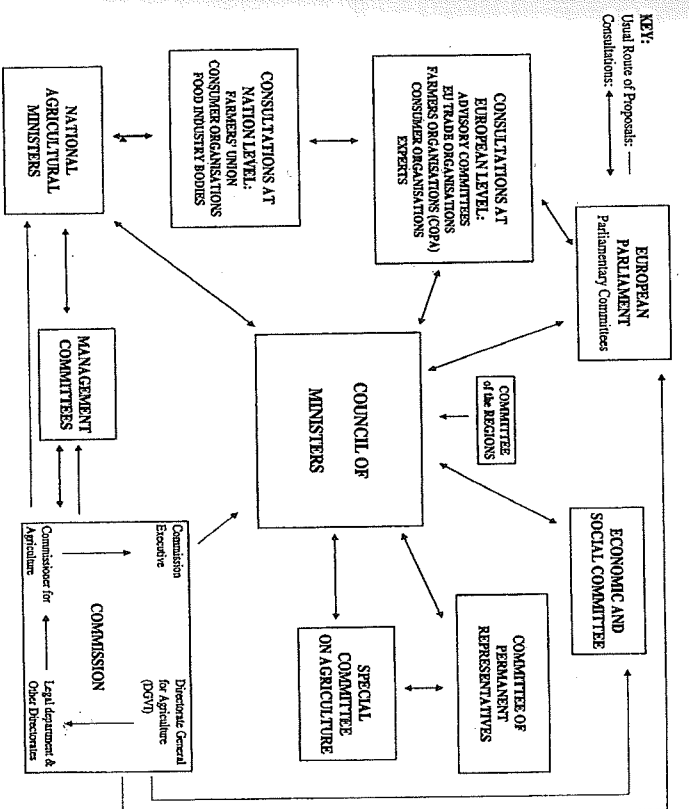


Figure 2.2 The agricultural policy process
Source: *Agra Europe CAP Monitor*, 24 November 2003

voting. Yet there is a high degree of compatibility in the ideological outlooks and policy preferences of the national agriculture ministers who make up the Council. Jones and Clark refer to a 'concordance system' in which Council actors 'attempt to maximise their benefits, whilst working within historically embedded rules and accepted codes of procedure' (2002: 121).

In this state-centric view, the work of DG Agriculture is constrained fundamentally by countries, even though it enjoys a monopoly on formal policy initiation at the supranational level. Even Commissioners 'seek to protect their national interests' (Grant 1997: 159). They are bound by domestic political constraints and they 'can never completely avoid a national bias, because their evaluative frame of reference, experience and contacts are all likely to centre on their home state' (Moyer and Josling 1990: 54). While the Commission has become one of the main advocates of policy reform, its capacity to deliver its proposals has been weak. Defenders of the status quo such as the French and Irish governments frequently have been able to water down proposals substantially, if not frustrate them completely – note especially the fate of the Agenda 2000 proposals for agriculture. So although it can act as a policy advocate, the Commission must 'tailor its proposals to pander to the prejudices of

farm ministers' if they are to stand any chance of success (Swinbank 1999: 53). Consequently the chief function of the Commission tends to be the more limited task of influencing the agenda, brokering package deals and trying to bridge the gaps between conflicting national negotiating positions. On agricultural trade, even though the Commission negotiates formally on behalf of the EU, national governments exert close control through the preparation of the negotiating mandate, monitored through operating mechanisms such as the Article 133 (ex. 113) Committee of the Council. This is composed of senior national officials who try to protect national interests. On the Doha Round, the negotiating mandate was agreed unanimously at a meeting of the Agriculture Council in September 1999. The Council indicated its intention to play an active role in the negotiations and its expectation that it would be kept regularly informed on progress.

Even low-level daily supervision of agricultural policy through the 'committee' network of advisory, regulatory and management committees is shaped by national factors. Whilst some argue that this system makes the Commission the 'crucial player in the day-to-day management of the CAP' (Peterson and Bomberg 1999: 140), it really is just another way in which national governments keep close control over the policy process. Committees are composed of national officials and national interests 'come to the surface in management committees just as in other parts of the decision-making process' (Grant 1997: 178).

One of the most common observations about the agricultural policy process is that it is highly compartmentalised, with 'its own special set of institutions and actors' (Grant 1997: 1). Increasingly, however, the firewalls between sectors have broken down and the range of policy actors has widened. This has been facilitated by exogenous pressures from enlargement, world trade liberalisation, the environment and the impact of the BSE crisis on food safety, health and consumer protection matters. The result has been to allow other interests greater influence on 'agricultural' policy, and indeed to make that policy 'less agricultural'. For Grant the inclusion of agriculture in world trade talks widened 'the circle of actors' involved in policy formulation whilst 'traditional core participants, notably the farm lobby, have become marginalised' (1997: 148). Within the Commission other directorates for environment, health and consumer protection, competition, budget and trade increasingly impinge on agricultural territory. Food, consumer protection and public health matters have increased in salience in the wake of crises such as BSE and FMD. Partly as a result of severe criticism over BSE, food safety and quality committees were shifted to a newly created directorate for Health and Consumer Protection (DG Sanco). In 2002 the regulatory committees on food safety were reorganised into a unified structure, with the merger of several existing standing committees into an integrated Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health. This is intended to embody the comprehensive 'farm-to-fork' approach to food policy.

The standard perspective on the role of the EP has been that it is marginal in agricultural policy-making. This judgement is based largely on its inability to affect the distribution of the agriculture budget, most of which is designated as 'compulsory expenditure', over which it has no control. Roederer-Ryning questions this traditional perspective, in which the role of the EP is either 'a rubber-stamp institution endorsing the proposals of the Commission, or as an antechamber to the Council of Ministers mirroring the national compromises and alliances struck by agriculture ministers' (2003: 114). For some, food scandals, especially the BSE crisis, provided a policy window that the EP exploited to extend its influence (Chambers 1999). On the other hand, the 'repeated failure' to obtain a voice in the agriculture policy process 'was symbolised by the Council's brushing aside of the EP's bitter condemnation of its behaviour during the 1996 beef crisis' (Peterson and Bomberg 1999: 135).

The weakening of agricultural exceptionalism is evident within the Parliament, where the institutional dominance of the established agriculture policy community has been undermined by the intrusion of food, animal health, consumer, environmental and rural development interests. Yet if the CAP is increasingly 'less about agriculture' then the EP may actually have a greater influence over policy in future, because non-farming issues are more firmly within its remit. Overall, however, the influence of the EP in agricultural policy remains marginal although it varies between issues. It is a minor player in debates about agricultural change but plays an increasingly important role in areas such as food safety and veterinary health.

Other supranational actors such as the European Court of Justice (ECJ) may be used as a 'court of last resort' on issues that countries find unacceptable, such as import restrictions on the grounds of protection against animal disease. As the arbiter of legality, the ECJ 'has a significant role to play in agricultural policy', especially in areas such as food standards (Moyer and Josling 1990: 36). Its decisions, therefore, can add to the fragmentation, complexity and uncertainty of the agricultural policy process. Heightened political sensitivity to budgetary discipline has also benefited the European Court of Auditors, which has used its increased authority 'to sharpen its critique of the productivist orientation of the CAP' (Roederer-Ryning 2002: 115).

Multilevel governance

The international and supranational arenas are part of a complex structure of multilevel governance. As developed by Marks and others, this is a critique of state-centric approaches to policy-making that emphasises how policy competences are shared between actors at different levels. States are no longer dominant but only 'one among a variety of actors contesting decisions that are made at a variety of levels' (Marks *et al.* 1996: 346). However, this raises a question about whether the idea of an 'EU agricultural policy process' makes any sense. In a system characterised by functional and

territorial complexity and multi-actoriness, the EU is just one of several crucial locations for agricultural policy, just one level of an interconnected multilevel structure. It is neither a policy with several levels nor the dominant centre for policy-making. As Wallace perceptively notes, policies are not developed in a structure of hierarchical levels but in 'locations of policy-making' that 'vary between, at one extreme, the local, and, at the other extreme, the global' (2000c: 73). So the EU arena 'is only part of a wider pattern of policy making beyond the nation state' where policy development involves choices between levels 'or the assignment of different segments of a given policy domain to different levels'. Indeed the EU is not the fulcrum of policy-making but more like a 'junction box through which connections are made between the country level and the global level' (Wallace 2000a: 7-8).

Agricultural policies therefore are made up of webs of decisions taken at all levels: international, national, regional and local as well as supranational. This is not to suggest that organisations such as national governments or EU institutions do not take decisions, or have different legal competencies. What actually exists in the agriculture sector is a multilevel and multistage policy process in which there are complex linkages at different parts of the process between international and supranational organisations, national governments, and sub-national policy actors. There is an immensely complex and differentiated agricultural policy process that involves a great diversity of actors and issues, works at different levels and arenas, often at different times. All this still leaves open questions about how much weight to assign to the different arenas, actors and institutions in terms of their relative influence in the policy process. Movement between levels is not necessarily substantial or irreversible, and functions can always be pulled back to the state level as well as moved up to the supranational.

This account is based on the assumption that the national, and increasingly sub-national, arena is the most important element in a multilevel agricultural policy process. A corollary to this is a healthy scepticism about the idea of 'Europeanisation' in which national policy processes and outcomes are harmonised through adapting to supranational pressures (Buller and Gamble 2002; Green Cowles *et al.* 2001). The extent to which domestic institutional structures have changed because of the CAP is open to question, and it is also methodologically difficult to separate those changes that have occurred as a result of national, supranational and international factors. The importance of the supranational arena is not in question. It is not clear, however, that the changes sometimes attributed to the CAP, such as the intensification of production, are not equally the result of other forces such as domestic, international or global pressures, or technological and economic change. Major trends including larger farm sizes and the substantial reduction in employment were clearly evident long before the CAP was even dreamed of. As Grant remarks, technical progress would 'have occurred without any stimulation from European institutions' (1997: 18).

On the other hand, if the idea of Europeanisation allows for continuous interaction between levels, and for adaptation of supranational arrangements as a result of national pressures, then the utility of the notion again is open to question. If the causal processes operate both ways it might be better to refer instead to the 'domestication' of European institutions and policies. The European Food Safety Authority is an illustration of policy transfer from the national to the supranational level because it was explicitly modelled on the Irish version (Taylor and Millar 2002). If this in turn becomes the model for other national structures, it is doubtful whether the process should then be termed Europeanisation rather than cross-national policy transfer. How also are spillback or rationalisation pressures to be explained? If some elements of agricultural policy are given back to countries, multilevel governance still exists but the process might be better described as European disintegration rather than integration.

Paradoxically then, the value of multilevel governance in agricultural policy is not that it highlights policy arenas beyond the national but that it directs attention away from Brussels. In other words, it helps to rescue a national perspective from a preoccupation with the supranational institutional arena. However, the emphasis on sub-national politics is welcome; indeed, the regional or local element is often the missing level in most accounts of the agricultural policy process. The increasingly important sub-national dimension is highlighted by the effects on agricultural policy of decentralisation in France and the creation of devolved territorial assemblies in the UK. Countries, encompassing national and sub-national arenas, remain crucially important in the multilevel system, and are not simply inputs into a supranational agricultural policy process. Even in terms of the formal location of decision-making, some decisions are taken at a local or regional level, especially concerning policy implementation and enforcement. Others are taken in the national arena, for example on social security and tax regimes for farmers and agri-food businesses. Beyond the state, history-making agreements about the reform of the CAP are taken formally at the supranational level through intergovernmental bargaining, and issues such as agricultural trade at the international or global level, albeit under the dominant influence of states.

Policy networks

Ideas about policy stages and multilevel governance highlight crucial elements in the agricultural policy process, but what actually takes place at these different levels and stages also needs to be explained. A wide variety of explanatory approaches have been applied to agricultural policy. Coleman (1998) and Skogstad (1998) have developed ideas of paradigm change and agricultural exceptionalism, for example. Notions of multilevel games (two- and three-level) are also used, particularly to explain patterns of bargaining

on issues such as agricultural trade liberalisation, CAP reform and EU enlargement (Coleman and Tangemann 1999; Rabinowicz 1999; Pollack 1998; Paarlberg 1997; Patterson 1997; Keeler 1996; Moyer 1993). This highlights the importance of domestic preference formation and the complex linkages between international, supranational and national level actors (including the importance of trade-offs, side payments and package deals in agricultural negotiations).

Undoubtedly the dominant paradigm in agricultural policy analysis centres on the ideas of pluralism, corporatism and policy networks (see, for example, Epstein 1997a; Frouws 1997; Collins 1995; Collins and Louloudis 1995; Smith 1990; Keeler 1987; and Cox *et al.* 1986). Analysis typically has taken the form of an assessment of stable arrangements, where there are close consensual linkages between the relevant state bureaucratic agencies responsible for the sector and influential farmers' interest groups. So the British agricultural policy process has been described as the 'archetypal case' of a tight policy network that is characterised by continuity and stability (Marsh 1998a: 11). As defined by Peterson, a policy network is an 'arena for the mediation of the interests of governments and interest groups' and implies 'that clusters of actors representing multiple organisations interact with one another' (1995: 391). This links the approach to contemporary notions of governance, largely because of the importance of relationships between state and non-state actors.

The policy networks literature is extensive and varied, and incorporates different perspectives, themes and approaches. Several attempts have been made to develop typologies of policy networks and interest group intermediation, which at the same time recognise variety across policy sectors and areas. In its best-known form, a policy network involves patterns of resource distribution, (inter)dependence, bargaining and exchange between organisations, within clearly defined rules of the game (Rhodes and Marsh 1992a and b). Here the policy network idea is used as a generic label that encompasses a variety of relationships between state and interest groups. The nature and extent of variation in network type depends upon several factors. These include the number of participants in the network, the type of interest involved, frequency of interaction between groups, the stability and continuity of relationships, presence or absence of consensus, the resources that participants have at their disposal, and the distribution of power. Using these variables, (closed) agricultural policy communities are characterised by a limited number of participants, frequent interaction and ideological consensus; (open) issue networks by many participants, fluctuating interaction and absence of consensus. Jordan *et al.* also distinguish between 'expanded and proliferating policy communities where there are a greater range of agricultural bodies involved in more and more communities' and 'issue network arrangements where there is a fundamental conflict among the more complex network' (1994: 516). Other network types such as negotiated economy

and parentela have also been identified in the agricultural sector (Greer 1994; Grant 1991).

Yet despite the dominance of the policy network paradigm in contemporary political analysis there has been a long-running debate about whether the notion has explanatory capacity or should just be used as a heuristic device. In British political science, the agricultural sector has provided the empirical battlefield for much of this argument (Marsh *et al.* 2001; Marsh and Smith 2000; Dowding 2001, 1995). So for Dowding, the chief sceptic, a good descriptive history of the formulation and implementation of post-war agricultural policy in the UK could not 'demonstrate that it has provided all the answers' because it 'cannot show which of the causal factors are most important' (2001: 90). Alternatively Marsh and Smith argue that their 'dialectical approach' helps to develop 'a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of the agricultural policy community' (2000: 12). On this view, policy outcomes are the result of interaction between agents and structures; network change results from the interaction between context and networks; and policy outcomes in turn affect the network. Such an approach is said to promote a fuller understanding of agricultural policy in Britain since the 1930s and of operation of the policy community.

At the heart of all policy network analysis is the issue of how choices can be understood, in particular with explaining policy change and stability. A policy community approach is often said to be best suited to explaining incremental adaptation whereas more fundamental policy change is linked to weaker issue networks and the importance of exogenous factors. There is no 'unidirectional causal link' between networks and outcomes (Marsh 1998b: 197). Outcomes can affect policy networks by altering their composition and the balance of forces between participants; by changing the broader social structure within which networks operate; and by affecting agent behaviour. Policy outcomes may also, in Lowi's terms, be 'constituent' and be designed precisely to change the membership and structure of networks.

The interaction between networks and their context is crucial in explaining policy change. This relationship incorporates both endogenous (internal to the networks themselves) and exogenous factors. Other policy networks within or outside the sector 'provide an important feature of the context within which particular networks operate' and impose important constraints (Marsh 1998b: 191). Exogenous environmental changes – economic, ideological, political and knowledge-based – can be crucial. It has been argued, for example, that policy change in agriculture has resulted more from external contextual pressures such as budgetary pressures than from a fragmentation or opening up of policy communities (Cavanagh *et al.* 1995: 628). Conversely, the impact of exogenous factors may be mediated or minimised by the policy network, for example political obstacles may restrict the exploitation of technological advances.

The policy networks concept highlights a highly complex and segmented policy process that involves a diversity of public and private policy actors, levels and perspectives. This raises three issues. First, the network approach is usually seen as a meso-level concept and this highlights the relationship between sectoral and sub-sectoral agricultural policy networks. In one view, sectoral networks – such as the closed and tightly defined ‘primary’ policy communities present in many countries in the late twentieth century – shape (and sometimes determine) the context and parameters within which sub-sectoral networks operate. The existence of such sub-sectoral networks does not threaten either the dominance of the central actors or the existing policy agenda. They are playing by the rules of the game set by the dominant coalition within the sectoral policy network’ (Cavanagh *et al.* 1995: 628). The sectoral network, therefore, lays down the ‘parameters within which the sub-sectoral network operates’ (Marsh 1998b: 186). Others reject the notion of a single, sectoral level agricultural policy community, stressing instead variation and fragmentation. Jordan and Maloney argue that the ‘overall policy regime’ is not imposed in a top-down way but, in bottom-up fashion, is ‘the result of outcomes in specialist niches. There is not a dominant core which allows the specialists to negotiate within limits’ (1995: 631). They present a picture of complexity and fragmentation, an agricultural ‘policy map’ that is ‘congested with detailed and overlapping sub-sectoral policy communities’ that form around intra-departmental divisions that reflect structural differences (Jordan *et al.* 1994: 507).

Second, there has been some debate about the suitability of the policy networks framework for supranational or transnational policy processes (Rhodes *et al.* 1996; Peterson 1995; Kassim 1994). Although it is not a main concern here, there seems to be no good reason why the concept cannot be applied to a multilevel agricultural policy process. Peterson and Bomberg have noted, for example, that ‘there is no group of EU policy-makers whose eyes light up more than CAP-involved officials when the concept of “policy networks” is explained to them’ (1999: 139). The policy network idea highlights interactions between different types of policy interests at supranational, national and sub-national levels of government; within the public and private spheres; and at the interface between traditional and new forms of governance institutions and actors (Adhead 2002). Coleman and Perl certainly insist that it can be adapted to study the policy process in internationalised policy environments such as agriculture, where ‘horizontal co-ordinating governance arrangements’ are important, and where national and transnational policy communities may co-exist (1999: 691).

Third, there is a lack of ‘explicit linkage between network models and models of the policy process. With some exceptions the network literature appears to assume that such a connection exists, whether at the stage of policy formulation, or perhaps throughout the process’ (Peters 1998: 25). Some argue that the policy networks approach is more appropriate for certain

stages. For Peterson it is best suited to agenda-setting and policy formulation, when networks may be able to ‘control the decision-making process and limit the range of choices being considered’ (1995: 397). Consequently their success is measured by their ability to prevent the reformulation or reopening of policy at later stages in the process. However, as Richardson points out, the idea of stable and consensual policy communities seems ‘more relevant in describing how change is implemented’ rather than explaining the changes themselves (2000: 1022). In this context, policy communities ‘may play a role only in the *processing* of issues at the technical and detailed level once key agenda decisions have been reached’ (Richardson 1996: 11). Similarly Coleman and Perl argue that national policy communities are involved ‘in each aspect of the policy process, but are particularly important when it comes to implementation’ (1999: 702). What such disagreements indicate is that the general policy network approach is sufficiently flexible (critics, of course, will say too flexible) to be applied at several levels of the policy process, not least because it allows for the presence of different network types at different stages and levels. Indeed, those actors and organisations involved in the networks that formulate policy ‘may not be the same as those actors involved in the implementation of those policies’ (Marsh 1998b: 192). Agricultural policy networks therefore, may be composed of different actors, take different forms at different points in the policy process, and policy formulation networks may differ from implementation structures. Certainly it seems strange to argue that policy networks are unsuited to the implementation phase of agricultural policy, particularly given the links between some network forms and the corporatist tradition in which groups are intimately involved in policy delivery.

As an institutional approach, the policy networks idea – especially in the guise of closed policy communities – also links to how some policies are resistant to change. The idea of path dependency highlights the view that ‘when a government program or organisation embarks upon a path there is an inertial tendency for those policy choices to persist’ (Peters 1999: 63). So institutional and policy actors ‘do not inherit a blank slate that they can remake at will when their preferences shift or unintended consequences become visible’. Instead, actors find that their room for manoeuvre is constrained by ‘the dead weight of previous institutional choices’ (Pierson 2000: 493). This is especially relevant to cases of policy stability and continuity, and draws attention to the importance of policy histories. However, policy courses may move away from original intentions to become inappropriate or have unintended consequences in the long run. The gaps between actually functioning policies and policy preferences then can become ‘locked-in’, not least because of institutional obstacles to reform such as the resistance of privileged groups and established policy routines (Pierson 1996).

That policy decisions take on their own momentum and subsequently become difficult to change has been used to try to explain the difficulties

encountered in achieving fundamental agricultural policy reform (Monpetit 2002; Moyer and Josling 2002). This can happen at the national level, for example the high level of continuity in British agricultural policy in the period after the Second World War. More widely, one reading of the CAP is that its construction in the particular historical context of post-war reconstruction in Europe, where increased food production to meet food shortages was the priority, created long-run path dependencies that subsequently structured policy development. As a result, Europe is still saddled with an expensive and failed agricultural policy that is inappropriate for the twenty-first century. Policy reform on this view is at best incremental and the CAP is 'still recognisable as the set of policies created in the 1960s' (Grant 1997: 82).

However, the CAP also was the result of an intergovernmental bargain, particularly between France and Germany with significant input from the Netherlands. So if in its essence it has stayed the same, what it has done is to continue 'the agricultural policies of the founder member states' (Rieget 2000: 183). The variable import levy mechanism for example was adopted from the Dutch method of protection and Hendriks (1991) points to the similarities between the objectives of the CAP and those of German agricultural policy in the immediate post-war period. As such the CAP embodies national agricultural policies of the 1950s that themselves were lock-in policy choices made by the majority of western European governments in the late nineteenth century. For Keeler, a path dependence approach 'makes understandable the extent to which today's CAP reflects . . . the power balance of the EC's founding years'. France in particular was 'uniquely empowered' in the original six and 'played the greatest role in shaping the policy legacy on which the current CAP is based' (1996: 136).

One crucial factor is that the policies and associated institutions have been protected and defended by established decision-rules and dominant agricultural policy communities. In agricultural support, for example, a 'whole generation of farmers will be locked into dependence on subsidies' that they will then defend vigorously (Daugbjerg 2003: 425). Consequently inertia remains a powerful force. Moyer and Josling emphasise the importance of policy history in understanding decisions, and how it often takes crisis to produce non-incremental change. The 'policy inertia is so great, and the vested interest of the farm community in the policy *status-quo* usually so significant, that the impetus for reform must come from outside', including political and economic pressures (2002: 8). Departure from an existing policy path 'only occurs when it becomes crystal clear the current policy is untenable' (2002: 27). Policy change is not impossible, however, and paths may be reversed or altered. There may not be an inevitable progression along a pre-set path but adaptive behaviour will likely produce incremental rather than radical policy change. Moreover the notions of feedback and the potentially far-reaching effects of cumulative change can explain more radical pol-

icy reform and eventually paradigm shift (Daugbjerg 2003; Kay 2003). Indeed some accounts of agricultural policy reform use the notion of paradigm change explicitly to explain a movement from a 'protected' to a 'market liberal' model (Coleman 1998; Skogstad 1998).

State capacity, ideas, values and contexts

Policy networks are sites for the fusion of ideas and policy, and involve the 'institutionalisation of beliefs, values, cultures and particular forms of behaviour' (Marsh and Smith 2000: 6). Network type is linked to the presence of conflict or consensus about values, strategy, tactics or behaviour. The durability of closed policy communities in the agricultural sector, for example, is directly related to shared values and ideology between participants. One such network form is an 'epistemic community' of technocratic and scientific experts who are 'bound together by shared beliefs, shared understandings of cause and effect within their particular domain of knowledge and shared notions of what actually constitutes valid knowledge' (Rosamond 2000: 125). In agricultural policy, this highlights the role played by scientists in managing FMD and BSE, although in the latter case the professional bonds within the veterinary science network were cross-cut by different national perspectives on the seriousness of the problem and how it could best be managed (Chambers 1999).

A policy network may also be 'a site of struggle between competing interests and conceptions of purpose' (Evans 2001: 545). The tensions between traditional policy communities and those that have emerged around organic farming, for example, can be expressed in terms of adversarial policy communities (Dudley and Richardson 1996). There is an argument that the long-established stable policy communities in agriculture have been able to adapt and maintain their dominant position in the face of both new ideas and rival networks. However, whilst established policy communities in agriculture still are influential, there is increasing fluidity and a trend towards more open issue networks. Four factors have contributed to the destabilisation of established policy communities according to Richardson (2000): government action, new entrants gaining access to policy communities, excluded interests using alternative policy arenas, and the importance of ideas and knowledge. Policy change is connected, for example, to the impact of new policy fashions and the way in which interest groups, particularly those excluded from established policy networks, are able to exploit new policy-making arenas. The role of ideas, values and knowledge are especially crucial in understanding stability and change. New ideas can pose a potential threat to well-established policy communities. Richardson argues that when new ideas about both policy problems and solutions become fashionable, they contain within themselves 'a virus-like quality and have an ability to disrupt existing policy systems, power relationships and policies' (Richardson 2000: 1017-18). The virus analogy indicates the 'importance of exogenously generated

ideas as a shock to both existing institutional arrangements and the actors that benefit from them' (Richardson 2000: 1019).

Crucially, agricultural policy analysis must take account of the influence of governments and the broader state institutions, structures and processes within which policy networks are located. It may be an exaggeration to say that the 'material power and legitimacy of elected government can ride roughshod over any policy community' (Dowding 1995: 144), but public actors do occupy a pivotal position. Governments are not just partners in the networks but can alter their nature and structure. Much contemporary policy change is often linked to a more active and 'impositional policy style'. For Richardson, policy styles have altered in response to exogenous pressures and by attacking 'some of the old distributional coalitions', governments have been 'key players in destabilising long-standing policy communities' (2000: 1021). Key figures in political authority therefore, may be able to break up or radically reconfigure existing policy networks and as such 'it is difficult, although far from impossible, for network members to ignore direct political pressure for change' (Marsh and Smith 2000: 8).

The agricultural policy process: stages, levels and networks

This chapter has set out three main ideas about the agricultural policy process: first, that it is multilevel; second, that it involves several stages ranging from agenda-setting to evaluation; and third, that the policy networks approach helps to highlight the crucial relationship between the state and organised interests. All of these ideas provide a way to approach an assessment of policy variation. The notion of multilevel policy-making allows a focus on the national and sub-national levels, whilst acknowledging that supranational and international factors are important. It is at these levels that demands for differentiation in policy are likely to be expressed and where the balance between agriculture and broader rural development is negotiated. Policy development across stages and levels accommodates the possibility that there are patterns of differentiation between and within countries and that the scope for flexibility may vary between agenda-setting, formulation and implementation.

Finally, policy networks analysis is useful because it integrates policy locations, stages and the relationships between interest groups and governments. Indeed sub-national policy networks may contribute to policy variation. Preferences are negotiated within networks between public and private actors, but governments remain central in the process. It is through the relationship between policy actors, especially governments and interest groups, that national policy preferences are partly formed. These preferences and policies reflect tensions between demands for uniformity and the need for flexibility. Changing network patterns, especially the weakening of dominant closed agricultural networks, reflect how a much wider range of actors are

involved in policy process that has a much broader remit, encompassing trade, the environment and rural development as well as farming. If pressures for a less common and less 'agricultural' policy approach are likely to emerge at the national and regional levels, then a comparative overview of the organisational and institutional structures for agricultural policy at these levels is essential.