**Think global, buy national: CSR, cooperatives and consumer concerns in the Norwegian food value chain**

**Abstract** In a world where issues of food safety and food security are increasingly important, the social responsibility of central actors in the food chain – producers and the main grocery chains – becomes more pressing. As a response, these actors move from implicitly assuming social responsibilities implied in laws, regulations and ethical customs, towards explicitly expressing social responsibilities. In this paper, we discuss the ethical values relevant for the social responsibility of central food producers and retailers in Norway, one of the most subsidized and protected areas of food production in the world. How do the actors perceive and express their social responsibility, and – given their position in the local, national and global market – how should they handle these responsibilities? We analyze Tine and Nortura, two producers owned by farmer cooperatives with market regulator function, as well as Coop – a dominant grocery chain in Norway, with basis in the same public ownership model as the farmer-owned cooperative producers. While the complex roles of these key actors in the Norwegian food market have been criticized from several angles, we argue that these multifaceted roles put them in a good position to promote informed consumer choices in a globalized market.

**Keywords** Food ethics ∙ Corporate social responsibility ∙ Multifunctional agriculture ∙ Consumer autonomy ∙ Trust ∙ Public values

**Introduction**

Farming in Norway is a challenging task. The cold climate and mountainous terrain make only 3 % of the land arable (Heie 2003).The farms are rather small, with 25 cows on an average Norwegian dairy farm, and only limited parts of the country are suitable for larger and more industrialized types of farms. Norwegian farms are typically small-scale farms requiring high input of labour, or are only suitable as grazing land for cattle or sheep. Due to the climatic conditions, the season is short and there is high risk of damage to harvest. Adding to this, Norway has one of the world’s highest costs of living, and next-to-full employment. Thus, it is difficult for other than the few exceptional relatively large-scale industrial farmers in Norway to produce an average level of income based on competition with products from countries more suitable for industrial farming.

In order to compensate, Norwegian farming is among the most subsidized and protected areas of food production in the world (OECD 2013), and the authorities generally counteract all attempts at reducing the high import tariff (Gaasland 2009). The motivation behind this regime is complex, consisting of several interacting factors: both productivist factors like food safety, food security, and food quality, as well as non-productivist factors like preserving cultural heritage, promoting tourism, and upholding the cultural landscape and the rural population. Subsidies and import tariffs are combined with a strong semi-corporatist structure of Norwegian land-based food production, with close collaboration between the authorities and the major food producers, owned by farmer cooperatives (Terragni 2004).

The protected food market and close collaboration between producers and authorities give the major food producers in Norway strong powers and much control in how to run their business. However, their power is gradually reduced since the Eighties, as the main grocery chains has gained control over the distribution and have much stronger bargaining power (Steensnæs et al. 2011, 43 f). Still, the largest producers have significant influence. They operate in a commercially organised market, but the market is skewed in their favour, due to the combined effects of taxes and subsidies. There are independent competitors within all sectors, but in several sectors, they are relatively small and unable to make significant shifts in the power structure. The major actors include the farmer-owned cooperative producers Tine in dairy and Nortura in meat, who also have a role as “market regulators” (Ibid 44 f). Moreover, in addition to being market regulators and market players, Tine and Nortura act as interest organisations for Norwegian farmers. This adds a third role to their already complex mandate.

Historically, the cooperation of dairy farmers was established to secure the sales and a stable and optimal price for the farmers’ products. The trade with agricultural products like meat, eggs, fruits, grain and vegetables, was organized in cooperatives, and in the 1930s, the Norwegian government gave these farmers’ cooperatives the task to regulate the market and supply the whole country with agricultural produce. The main objectives with this system were to stabilize the income of farmers and provide all regions of Norway with a steady access to farm products to more or less equal prices.

The Norwegian system of cooperation between the farmer’s cooperatives and the Government is still fully in use. The Norwegian farming system is based on four instruments: Import toll, subsidy agreement, farmer’s cooperatives and market regulation (Landbrukssamvirke 2015). High import toll on foreign produce shields Norwegian farm production and subsidies complements the profits of sales, making farming economically worthwhile for the Norwegian farmer. The farmers’ cooperatives act as market regulators with a duty to receive all produce from Norwegian farmers, and to supply the food industry and wholesalers: “In addition to their role as major market players, the cooperatives are used as government agents and are instrumental in the implementation of agricultural policies. This combination of being a market player and at the same time a regulator is often, and for obvious reasons, referred to as the dual role of cooperatives.” (Tennbakk 2004, 232)

A precondition for mastering this role is that these corporations retain a significant market share, as they are obliged to buy products from farmers based on a quota system, as well as deliver milk, meat and eggs to their own and other companies’ processing plants at a fixed price. Contrary to EU policy[[1]](#footnote-1), it is not the Norwegian government, but the farmers’ cooperatives that through their market regulator role secures minimum prices and holds the economic responsibility for over-production in the agricultural sector.

In an international perspective, Tine and Nortura are minor corporations, but within the Norwegian context, they have a dominant position, due to the requirements of their government-appointed market regulator role. In their triple role as farmers’ cooperative, commercial actor and political tool, these cooperatives already have what we can call role-defined corporate social responsibilities. These responsibilities are clearly defined by their mandates, for instance Tine’s obligation as a farmers’ cooperative to secure “the best [i.e. highest] possible price for milk”. The strong protection and subsidy of Norwegian food production induces both Tine and Nortura as commercial actors with significant power and corresponding responsibilities. An active and explicit engagement with and fulfilment of these responsibilities becomes more pressing as the autonomy of the consumer is increasingly emphasized, the protectionist measures are increasingly questioned, and the issues of food safety and food security are high on the agenda

In this article, we will discuss the social responsibility of central food producers and retailers in Norway regarding the ethical values expressed in Norwegian food discourse. As mentioned above, the emergence of big grocery chains also gives retailers significant power over issues related to food safety, security and quality: the Norwegian grocery market is currently totally dominated by three grocery chains sharing 96% of the market. Therefore, we will include them as equally important when discussing the social responsibility of commercial actors in the food chain. To represent the retailers we have chosen the Coop chain, which is customer owned and has background in the same public ownership model as the cooperative producers Tine and Nortura.

The questions we will discuss in this article are: What is the basis for the social responsibilities of Norwegian food producers and retailers, and how are these responsibilities affected by changes in the global and national food market? How do these actors perceive of their responsibilities, as expressed in their self-presentations and practices? How should they handle these responsibilities, given their positions in the Norwegian food market? Do their multifaceted roles put them in a good position to promote informed consumer choices in a globalized market?

**Explicating social responsibility in the Norwegian food sector**

In the past, Norwegian companies have in general been relatively silent on the issue of corporate social responsibility (CSR). One reason is that many of the activities falling into the broad category of CSR in Norway are firmly rooted in laws, regulations and societal expectations. Thus, political authorities are seen as the safeguards of some of the social responsibilities which in the Anglo-American context to a larger extent have been at the discretion of private companies. This is specifically the case for labor rights such as workers’ pay, benefits, and safe working conditions. These issues have been negotiated and institutionalized through political compromises and tripartite agreements, a model typical for the Scandinavian countries. Thus, Scandinavian companies have typically not explicitly addressed these issues as a matter of company-specific policies, but simply adapted to the prevailing institutional framework.

However, even though Scandinavian companies typically have not made their responsibilities explicit, there is no evidence suggesting that these companies have performed in a less socially responsible way – on the contrary, Scandinavian companies are overrepresented in international CSR and sustainability performance measurements (Midttun et al. 2006; Strand and Freeman 2013). On this background, it makes sense to talk about a specific “Scandinavian model” of CSR. The model is based on a consensual political culture, a strong social-democratic welfare state, and well-functioning partnerships between business, government, and labour organizations (Gjølberg 2010) In this context, offering safe working conditions and security in the form of social benefits is primarily framed as compliance with laws and agreements rather than as business-driven initiatives presented in the language of CSR. The same is arguably the case for environmental issues, food safety, and a number of other topics on the original, Anglo-American CSR agenda.

Applying Matten and Moon’s (Matten and Moon 2008) distinction between “explicit” and “implicit” CSR, we could say that a majority of Scandinavian companies have traditionally not communicated their sense of social responsibility on these areas *explicitly*, but rather *implicitly* assumed such responsibilities. However, in a time of economic globalization, where the state’s control function is played down, many Scandinavian companies seem to become increasingly explicit regarding their role in society, and start expressing their social responsibilities both as a matter of external communication and brand building and for purposes of internal communication and team building (Carson et al. 2015)

This process towards “explicating the implicit” is connected with an increasing self-regulation of social and environmental issues that also affect Norwegian cooperative-owned food producers, leading them to redefine their social responsibility. Traditionally, their primary social responsibility has been to protect the interests of the farmers, or more generally to maintain Norwegian food production. Increasing international competition and the development towards self-regulation creates a new situation where food producers must communicate more explicitly on issues of quality, health and safety, as well as environmental and ethical values. This is in line with a general rise in “organizational expressiveness” (Schultz et al., 2000), with increasing attention to the image, reputation, identity and values of products and organizations, a tendency which is especially striking when it comes to social and environmental issues (Røvik, 2007). The increased global competition in the food market - even for the relatively protected Norwegian producers - leads to more focus on the expanded product concept in order to differentiate products, brands and companies. Producers thus seek to associate their products with positive values, and environmental and social performance becomes strategically important for branding and image building.

CSR can be considered as “a strategic approach to legitimacy (Suchman 1995), whereby social and environmental values are increasingly used in brand-building in order to strengthen the reputation of the organization. Legitimacy can be defined as “a generalized perception or assumption that organizational activities are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman 1995, p. 577). According to the neo-institutional perspective of Matten and Moon, legitimacy is of vital importance since “organizational practices change and become institutionalized because they are considered legitimate” (Matten and Moon 2008, p. 411). Becoming more expressive about social and environmental values, thus explicating CSR, is a strategic move by which an organization can gain, maintain, or repair social legitimacy. As we will show in the following, Tine, Nortura and Coop increasingly use labelling as well as advertising campaigns to promote social and environmental values, which can be seen to exemplify the transition from implicit to explicit CSR, as a response to the changing market- and production conditions these organizations face.

**Labelling: Promoting the autonomy of companies and consumers**

The Norwegian food sector is, even to a larger extent than other market areas, characterized by strong institutionalization built up around the interplay between a few dominating industry actors, political institutions such as import restrictions, price regulation, and annually negotiated agreements. A precondition for Nortura’s and Tine’s mastering of their roles as market regulators is that these corporations retain a significant market share, in Tine’s case of about 81 % (Listhaug 2014), as they are obliged to buy products from all Norwegian farmers as well as to deliver to any Norwegian processing plant. The strong institutionalization is recognized in the fact that the basic system is taken for granted and not questioned, and that the actors enjoy high legitimacy and significant latitude (Kjærnes et al. 2010). Consumers are generally satisfied with the supply of Norwegian food, and the producers enjoy a high level of trust and loyalty (Halkier et al. 2007).

However, in spite of a political consensus on the continuation of traditional agricultural and food policy in Norway – i.e. maintaining a high level of regulation and subsidies and even on increasing Norwegian food production in the years to come (Stortingsmelding 2011-2012) – there are a number of challenges to the status quo of the Norwegian food sector. International agreements on trade (e.g. WTO and EU) lead to increasing competition from abroad, as well as an increasing importance attached to consumer interests over producer interests in the political debate (Farsund 2014). New systems of traceability and quality control also gradually redirect the responsibility for the safety of Norwegian food from the direct control of the authorities to the industry actors themselves (e.g. ISO and HACCP).

The development towards self-regulation represents a challenge for the Norwegian food sector, since the high trust consumers place in Norwegian food products traditionally has been tightly connected with the comprehensive external control systems (Terragni 2004) and become more vulnerable when the commercial sector takes over some of the control. The role of the cooperative-owned food producers thus becomes more complex. As a political tool, the primary social responsibility of these organizations is to protect the interests of the farmers, or more generally to maintain Norwegian food production. The strategy has been to offer reasonably priced, standard-quality products, while the health and safety of the products has been controlled and guaranteed by the authorities. Self-regulation and increasing international competition creates a new situation where food producers must communicate explicitly on issues of quality, health and safety.

The safety and security of food products gradually goes from being secured by authorities and implicitly assumed by consumers to becoming a matter of product differentiation. Explicating these qualities is then used to distinguish certain products from other similar products through branding. Ethical, environmental and social values are increasingly used for product differentiation as well, as we have seen in imported goods such as fair trade coffee, dolphin safe tuna and rain forest certified teak furniture.

Modern food production and distribution is generally characterised by an increased relegation of control to the consumer, through a competitive food market with a number of different products and brands, and strong demands on labelling. Traditionally, consumers have been more or less invisible in the Norwegian food market, in any other way than as an anonymous source of demand of safe and reasonable products of standard quality. In recent years, however, a number of so-called collective labels have emerged in the Norwegian food sector. These labels are governed by either a public body or a private initiative. The label owner decides on and controls the standard, and the intention of the standard is to influence both production and consumption (Myskja 2015).

For commercial actors, labelling becomes a way to differentiate their products by communicating social and environmental responsibility, or simply the origin of the product. In the Norwegian food market, the “Keyhole” label is meant to promote healthy food choices; the “Debio” label signals organic production, while the “Enjoy Norway” label simply serves to help consumers pick out Norwegian produced and quality controlled products.

In the area of information beyond that which is required by law, the requirements of collective labels raise issues such as environmentally sound food production, animal welfare, food as a political issue and food as a cultural value. Importantly, Norwegian food producers have tried to combine these values in the promotion of Norwegian food as inhabiting all these qualities; local, sustainable, environmentally sound, animal friendly and fair. The original trademark “Godt norsk” [“Good Norwegian”] was introduced as a joint public-private initiative in 1994. “Godt norsk” suggested that the labelled products were well-tasting, morally and qualitatively good products from Norway, but also that Norwegian products as such are “good” in this multi-faceted way. This did hit a note with the consumers, who generally considered Norwegian farming to be “good”.

In 2006, the “Godt norsk” label was nevertheless withdrawn. As only some producers chose to use it, for a limited range of products, the label was perceived as arbitrary (Folsland 2003). It was also ridiculed as conceited and nationalistic. “Godt norsk” was in 2009 replaced by the label “Nyt Norge”, which is still in use. “Nyt Norge” translates both as “Enjoy Norway” and as “Savour Norway”, and appears less excluding and chauvinistic than the “Godt Norsk” label, although the essential association arguably still is that national products are of superior quality and safety.

The “Nyt Norge” label was established by the Matmerk trust (Matmerk 2015), and Matmerk licence the use of the label according to three criteria: (1) that the labelled products are made from Norwegian raw materials, (2) produced by companies localised in Norway, and (3) coming from farms following the comprehensive KLS quality control system[[2]](#footnote-2). The Matmerk trust is financed by governmental funds as well as funds from farmers’ organisations, cooperative companies and grocery chains, again demonstrating the close cooperation between all the actors in the Norwegian food value chain in establishing the premises for the market for Norwegian food products.

**“Enjoy Norway”: The golden mean of the national, between the local and the global**

This strategy of marketing “Norwegian” as particularly good is threatened from two sides. Standard-quality, Norwegian products on the one hand meet *external* competition on price and quality from foreign products gradually perceived as equally good as the “good Norwegian” bulk products (Jacobsen 2004), and on the other hand meet *internal* competition from regional products alluding to the values associated with local, “short-travelled” food.

Concerning the external challenge, some areas in southern Norway are suited for industrialised farming, even though large farms in the Norwegian context will be small in an international context. The current Norwegian agricultural policy aims to stimulate a structural change for bigger and more centralised farms in order to make more price competitive Norwegian products. One way of achieving this is to import large amounts of foreign feed (e.g. Brazilian soybeans) to make large scale chicken and pig farm production possible (Ekern 2013), thus supplying the domestic market with inexpensive “Norwegian” lean meats (Løkeland-Stai and Lie 2012).

What sets the meat, eggs and milk produced by large Norwegian farms apart from similar products from factory farms in other parts of Europe? The use of pesticides (Bolli 2014) and antibiotics (NORM/NORM-VET 2014) is very low in Norwegian agriculture as compared to imported agricultural products. It is interesting to note that while the “Enjoy Norway” brand is explicitly linked up with health and safety issues, the issues of differentiated quality or taste are communicated more implicitly. Recently, Matmerk ran an ad campaign with the headline: “Norway is not made for food production. That is why we have to do it.” (Matmerk 2015) The message of the ad was that the natural conditions for farming in Norway – cold climate, small farms, and huge distances – are obstacles for low cost production, but advantages for food security. Norwegian farming has not suffered any major food scandals. This is due to a strict governmental control regime regarding both domestic agricultural practises and the import of feed, animals, plants, etc. But, it is also importantly due to the geographical and climatic conditions and the unsuitability of the kind of industrial farming associated with poor animal welfare, high levels of imported feed and non-sustainable practices (Storstad 2007).

Concerning the internal challenge, the continued and state-supported focus on the national as a guarantee of quality and purity is part of the explanation why products from organic farming have been less important in the Norwegian food markets. Norwegian customers hold the opinion that Norwegian farming has relatively high standards in terms of sustainability, animal welfare and intensity, making the choice of certified organic products more or less superfluous (Storstad and Bjørkhaug 2003). Moreover, the infrastructure and expertise of the quality control systems of the large national cooperative companies are well equipped to keep a level of food security control that is hard to match for organic or non-organic local producers.

A growing number of Norwegian customers do however choose to spend more money on buying food that is locally grown, grown according to principles of organic farming, or imported from Fairtrade farms. This group of idealistically motivated customers is still a small minority, but they generally belong to the middle and upper classes and have significant economic and social resources, and therefore play an important role in the market. The Norwegian government likewise have determined policies directed at stimulating the development of local food products and organic food (Stortingsmelding 2011-2012). Fair trade is also encouraged by special tax exemptions for food and other products from developing countries, even if they compete with Norwegian products.

However, when the market regulating producers and grocery chains join forces with the government in creating a combined quality control system and product promotion campaign for Norwegian products, such as “Godt norsk” or “Nyt Norge”, this affects the accessibility of other products, since the promotion of competing products face a serious uphill struggle. This is probably most important concerning both domestic and imported niche products associated with food ethics, as they compete on the same market of ethical consumerism.

As long as the association of “Norwegian” with pure and safe is successful, the national labelling alludes to at least some of the values promoted in local and organic food. The focus on the quality and safety of Norwegian products has been a persistent and (so far) relatively successful strategy. The special character of the protected Norwegian food market is undoubtedly at least part of the explanation for this success. We will now take a closer look at three central players in this market.

**Tine**

Tine is Norway's by far largest producer, distributor and exporter of dairy products. Tine began as an association of Norwegian dairy farmers in 1881, and today Tine is owned by 13,000 Norwegian farmers (Tine 2015), and is one of 13 agricultural cooperatives in Norway. From 1930 onwards, the Norwegian government has relied on the dairy farmers’ cooperative to regulate the dairy market and supply the whole country with dairy products. Today, Tine has the triple role of being a cooperative of Norwegian farmers, market regulator and the dominant commercial actor of the Norwegian dairy sector.

Tine’s threefold mandate indeed sets objectives that are pointing in different directions. Firstly, being owned by the dairy farmers, Tine has “the best possible price for milk” as a stated objective for its activity (Tine 2014). The price level of milk has direct consequences for the viability of farms, and thus the interest of farmers. As a farmer cooperative, Tine would also work for high pricing of dairy products by promoting high import tax on dairy products and favourable adjustments of milk quotas.

Secondly, in the role of market regulator, Tine’s task is to receive milk from all farmers for an equal price, and to supply its own as well as competing domestic dairy companies with milk at an equal price. The milk price and quantity should create an equal starting point for Tine and competing domestic dairies in the market for dairy products in Norway. The special market regulator role demands a keen eye on the future needs of all agents in the value chain, and to use the policy instruments available to satisfy these needs. The market regulation system works quite well in practice, despite a failure to predict a sudden increased demand for butter due to the vogue of the low carb-diet, resulting in a temporary shortage in the “Butter crisis” of 2011. And thirdly, as a commercial actor in this market, Tine’s goal is to offer products that are competitive on price and quality.

Being the dominant supplier of dairy products for decades in Norway, Tine has the advantage of having shaped the taste preferences of Norwegian consumers by their range of products. Tine has also invested heavily in marketing campaigns, with one of the largest advertising budget of all Norwegian firms (2nd largest in 2011 (Kampanje 2012)). Tine’s central position in shielding the Norwegian market from importhas led to criticism for blocking the freedom of Norwegian consumers and neglecting the consumers’ interest in minimizing the household expenditure on food. This concern in particular refers to the toll barriers put in place to secure the sales of high volume dairy products like standard cheese and milk from Norwegian farms. A case in point is Tine’s suggested toll raise on certain cheese types to a staggering 277 per cent, implemented by the Norwegian government in 2013, despite heavy criticism from the EU (English 2014).

The protectionism from foreign products and the dominating domestic position of Tine in the Norwegian market can and has been challenged together with theenvironmental and social aspect of shielding Norwegian farming. In order to be convincing, Tine’s advertised message depends on several factors, and importantly on Tine’s ability to appear as *fair*, *local* and *environmentally sound*.

Regarding *fairness*, Tine has been met with criticism from competitors and consumers for utilizing their dominant market position to obstruct the establishment of a fair domestic market for dairy products, most markedly in a conflict over access to markets with the competing Synnøve Finden-company in 2004 (Høyesterett 2011). Tine’s central position in shielding the Norwegian market from import has also led to criticism of blocking the interests of both farmers from other countries (English 2014) as well as Norwegian consumers and their interest in minimizing the household expenditure on food.

The *environmental aspect* of Tine’s shielding Norwegian farming has also been questioned, as the Norwegian climate and topography makes farming difficult. Farming practices that are less efficient and dependent on governmental measures might be environmentally unfavourable (McWilliams 2009). In addition, Tine’s policy of securing the viability of farming in all parts of the country, even in remote districts where production volumes and yields are low and transportation costs are high, can be questioned from an environmental perspective. From a comparative point of view, it seems more economically effective and ecologically beneficent to grow crops in the lowlands in the southern half of Norway – or indeed in countries south of Norway. However, it is difficult to make a comprehensive assessment of the environmental impact of farming, as reported by Roer and colleagues (Roer et al. 2013). These inconclusive findings are echoed in other studies (Øst 2013), and make it hard to assess the environmental aspect of keeping up Norwegian farming all over the country by subsidies and toll barriers. No study has to our knowledge shown, however, that the ecological footprint of Norwegian farming is bigger than comparable farming abroad (Ursin 2015).

Regarding *local identity*, Tine finds itself in a precarious position. In the role of being a farmer’s co-operative with the best possible milk price and high import tariffs as clear interests, both international and local goods present a potential threat to Tine’s interests of upholding Norwegian milk farms. The introduction of strong regional and local Norwegian brands, or strong international organic brands, might all act to weaken the association of *“Norwegian”* with “quality”, “purity” and “naturalness”. If it is the *local* origin that is associated with the quality of the products, and not the national origin, there would be no reason to buy Norwegian instead of products from small-scale products from abroad. Consequently, Tine commercials are focusing on the generic qualities of Norwegian milk. Matmerk, the administrator of the “Enjoy Norway” label, is partly financed by Tine. Tine now offers milk from Norwegian regions, and milk from ecological farms, but the main message is still that *Norwegian* milk as such is “maybe the finest milk in the world”.

The traditional “bulk product regime” (Jacobsen 2004) of Norwegian agriculture policy is challenged both by the steady push towards liberal trade policies in the negotiations with the EU and in the WTO, and the wave of regional and local food. Tine’s combined roles of interest organization, implementer of agricultural policies and commercial actor is heavily challenged by principled criticism from the perspective of liberal trade, with demands to split up the company to clearly separate these roles.

As a response to this criticism, and in accordance with new public management principles (Christensen and Lægreid 2001), Tine indeed has taken a first step down this line by dividing their enterprise into subdivisions along the lines of the company roles of being cooperative, market regulator and commercial actor. Despite this reorganization, Tine nevertheless retains its triple role. In the heat of Tine’s conflict with Synnøve Finden (the major competing dairy producer in Norway), The Norwegian Minister of Modernisation proposed to divide Tine into separate companies, but this did not happen (Vølstad 2005).

How should Tine handle the responsibilities given by being a co-operative of Norwegian farmers, market regulator and commercial actor? Is it desirable or even legitimate to mix these roles from a CSR point of view? The answers to these questions depend both on Tine’s ability to fulfil its role obligations, and the legitimacy and coherence of the interests and ideals that shape the objectives of these roles. Here, one of the basic ideals of liberal societies is the ideal of the autonomous citizen – assuming the role of the autonomous consumer in a market economy (Christman and Anderson 2005; Cunningham 2003). The autonomous citizen qua consumer must be equipped with the possibility to make independent and informed food choices. The ideal of the autonomous consumer is a driver for restructuring any collective and monopolist provision systems of goods and services into market solutions. To enable the autonomy of the consumer, products should be branded with recognizable qualities that set it apart from similar products.

Being a tool for realizing Norwegian agricultural policy in the dairy sector means that Tine primarily relates to the consumers in their role as citizens. The requirement of relating to consumers in the role of customers in the market sphere and take on a clearer identity as a market player, implies that Tine must place a stronger emphasis on explicitly stating its social responsibilities as part of building a brand.A carton of Tine milk should not just be milk, but importantly milk from Tine. Being a commercial actor among other actors on the one hand directs Tine away from the company’s hard tied social responsibilities as an integral part of Norwegian agricultural policy. On the other hand, it makes Tine more directly responsible for social and environmental issues, forcing the organization to become more explicit on these matters in its relation to the government and the customers.

**Nortura**

Nortura is a Norwegian agricultural cooperative that is owned by 31 000 Norwegian farmers nationwide. Nortura operates slaughterhouses and other processing plants related to meat and eggs. Nortura has a wide variety of brands, including Gilde (Norwegian red meat), Prior (Norwegian white meat and eggs), Thulefjord and Joika (reindeer meats and other products from Northern Norway), and Alfathi (halal slaughtered meat) (Nortura 2015a). Like Tine, Nortura has the triple role of being a cooperative of Norwegian farmers, market regulator and the dominant commercial actor of the Norwegian meat and egg sector. Thus, Nortura has similar challenges to those of Tine, and must handle related criticisms as those levelled against Tine.

Nortura’s mandate, like Tine’s, sets objectives that are pointing in different directions. Firstly, being owned by the meat farmers, Nortura has the highest possible price for meat and eggs for its member farmers as a stated objective for its activity (Nortura 2015b). Secondly, in the role of market regulator, Nortura’s task is to receive meat and eggs from all farmers, to supply the Norwegian domestic market, and suggest production quotas and toll barrier adjustments in order to stabilize the market. Thirdly, as a commercial actor in this market, Nortura’s goal is to offer products that are competitive on price and quality. Nortura, again like Tine, has a high marketing budget, and communicates with its consumers through sites that promotes meat and egg, have information on the benefits of Norwegian products, contains a wealth of recipes, etc.

High toll barriers for foreign meat and egg protect the domestic sales of Nortura’s products. A report by the Norwegian institute for consumer research, SIFO (Kjærnes et al. 2010), infers from this that the “Enjoy Norway” campaign seems to be directed towards promoting the interests of Norwegian meat producers rather than driven by consumer interests. As a protest against the protectionist objective of the “Enjoy Norway” brand, a number of Norwegian NGOs in 2011 launched the campaign “Enjoy Africa”, with the aim of opening up the Norwegian market for more products from the south (FIVH 2012). They were, however, criticized by representatives from other NGOs for being naive and running the errand of multinational companies – who would be the first to benefit from lower Norwegian toll barriers – rather than poor African farmers (Lundeberg 2012).

The CSR page of nortura.no (in Norwegian only) has 7 sections: Animal welfare, Working conditions, Market regulation, Rural development, Safe food, Environment and sustainability, and Health and nourishment. In contrast to Tine, Nortura operates products that are both more ethically contested and easier to transport. The current consumption volume of meat in developed countries is controversial both for environmental and animal welfare reasons, and the promotion of meat eating is thus a delicate issue for Nortura’s stated CSR policies of environment and sustainability, and of health and nourishment. The ready availability of frozen, preserved and processed meat and meat products from all over the world, including developing countries, also makes it extra demanding for Nortura to defend the protection of Norwegian meat sales. Adding to this, the current policy of lowering the production costs of Norwegian poultry and pig meats through industrialized farming based on high volume import of Brazilian soy feed blurs the distinction of Norwegian and foreign meats (Ekern 2013). Nortura legitimizes its protection of Norwegian meat farming by arguing for a central role of farming for the Norwegian society, a superior quality and safety of Norwegian meat, and superior animal welfare conditions of Norwegian meat farms and sustainability effects of the Norwegian meat value chain (Nortura 2016).

**Coop**

Coop Norge is a Norwegian consumer cooperative owned by 102 local cooperatives with more than 1.4 million members (COOP 2015a). The local cooperatives are led by boards elected by the members, and operate the Coop stores and factories. Coop was formed in 1906, with the aim of promoting its member consumers’ interest in reasonably priced quality foods and goods. Due to opposition from other market actors, Coop had to establish and operate a number of factories in order to provide the standard range of goods to their grocery stores (COOP 2015b). In this way, Coop has a history of being an outsider organization, fighting the establishment on behalf of the consumer. Today, however, Coop is one of only three dominating retail chains in Norway, giving Coop significant power in the Norwegian grocery market.

Coop’s stated aims (COOP 2015a) are to promote the dual interests of its members for competitive quality products and of Coop as a robust and viable cooperative company. The Coop organization has currently pointed out organic and healthy food as their main area of commitment. Consequently, Coop has established its own label, Änglamark, for organic food. Organic Änglamark milk from the privately owned dairy producer Rørøsmeieriet was introduced by Coop in 2010. This made Coop the first retail chain in Norway to challenge the Tine dominance in the dairy market with their own label (Hvamstad 2010). The interests of Tine as a farmers’ organization strategically promoting national qualities here diverges from interests of Coop as a consumer organization promoting organic qualities. This is neatly illustrated by the fact that the label was introduced jointly by the Scandinavian cooperatives, using the Swedish word Änglamark (“Angel field”) to signify the purity of organic food regardless of country of origin. The Änglamark label of Coop thus potentially de-legitimizes Tine’s argument for high import toll barriers on grounds of a special purity of Norwegian milk. This simplified conclusion is, however, challenged by the fact that Rørosmeieriet cooperates closely with Tine both in milk delivery and in distribution of products (Oikos 2013) This can be regarded as one of Tine’s strategies for fulfilling its responsibilities.

Concerning health, the research institution SIFO found that the current average advertisement budget of Norwegian grocery chains for promoting meat products was three times the total amount of the money spent on promotion of fruits and vegetables (SIFO 2014). This promotion of meat products is arguably at odds with Coop’s commitment to promote healthy food, but complies with Nortura’s aim of securing the sales interests of its owners – the Norwegian meat farmers.

**Discussion**

Tine, Nortura and Coop all started out as cooperatives with the aim of promoting the interests of their member farmers and consumers, respectively. All three actors have dominant positions in the Norwegian food market, and consequently have significant power in this market. In addition, Tine and Nortura have since the 1930s also operated as market regulators. Thus, their power to influence the market conditions is especially forceful, given this special role. With power comes responsibility. We have in this article given some examples of how Tine, Nortura and Coop as a response to changing market conditions have moved from implicitly acknowledging their responsibility to explicitly communicating their responsibility in advertisements, on web pages and in CSR documents.

For Tine and Nortura, an increasingly important aspect of promoting the interests of Norwegian farmers is to promote their interests not just in relation to opposing interest groups in Norway (for instance the interest of farmers versus consumers in having a high versus low price on meat products). Tine and Nortura also defend the interest of Norwegian farmers in relation to the interests of foreign farmers and suppliers to compete on favourable terms in the Norwegian market. The role of Tine and Nortura in shielding Norwegian farm products from international competition can easily be justified in terms of pure interest politics. Whether the interests of Norwegian farmers, however, are concurrent with the interests of Norwegian consumers, is a matter of debate and a thorny issue for Coop.

Arguments for the legitimacy of securing the viability of Norwegian farming through protection of the Norwegian food market are publicly communicated both by the cooperatives and by the semi-governmental certification institutions like Nyt Norge. The mentioned ad campaign of Nyt Norge, headed “Norway is not made for food production. That is why we have to do it.”, effectively summarizes the basic argument of this legitimization: Foodstuffs from Norwegian farms are hard to produce, because of the harsh climate and challenging topography, but the harsh climate and small farm structure also makes Norwegian food pure and safe – and worthwhile to pursue and protect. It is further pointed out that the purity of Norwegian foodstuffs is secured by strict import and domestic quality control.

Adding to natural conditions that are unfavourable in economic terms, Norwegian farming is also challenged by high wage costs. To uphold Norwegian farming, against all odds, is both nationally and internationally argued for by governmental and non-governmental bodies from the perspectives of a very diverse set of functions: Food security, cultural heritage, tourism, rural development, and to preserve the cultural landscape (Daugstad et al. 2006). Norwegian farm products are described as “sensitive products” (Rosendal 2012), that should be subsidized and regulated in a special manner because of their multifunctional importance and the Norwegian climatic conditions. Reidar Almås describes this in terms of a social contract between the Government and Norwegian farmers, where the Government secures the economic viability of Norwegian farms, and the farmers aim to fulfil the multifunctional objectives of Norwegian farming (Almås and Gjerdåker 2004).

Tine and Nortura are both important players in the ongoing negotiation of this social contract. Their multifunctional roles are criticized from the viewpoint of economics, arguing that the special treatment of the agricultural sector in Norway, integrating aims of food production with a wide range of other aims is a wasteful use of resources (Brunstad et al. 2005). Consequently, there should be a clear separation between economic support for agricultural production and maintenance of cultural landscapes and other public goods. (Prestegard 2005) The added value of Norwegian farming, that is other aims than food production for a standard market, should be part of national heritage politics, regional politics etc., rather than part of agricultural politics. In this way, farmers and the agricultural sector as a whole is liberated from a confusing set of regulations, restrictions and aims. Champions of this view point to the success story of moving from protectionist to internationally competitive farming in New Zealand, empowering the farmers (Aerni 2009).

To be paid to uphold public goods rather than to produce foodstuffs is however met with resistance among Norwegian farmers and farmer’s organizations (Kvakkestad et al. 2015). In harmony with this, the Norwegian agricultural funding structure aims to promote added values through active farming for food production purposes (Daugstad et al. 2006). This policy is further in line with the EU perspective that European agriculture is a key upholder of public goods, thus “intrinsically multifunctional” (Dibden and Cocklin 2009; Burton and Wilson 2012). This perspective is essential in the agricultural policy of a number of high cost countries, including Austria (Hageberg 2014), Switzerland (Aerni 2009), and Japan (Simpson 2005).

In the article *Taking consumers seriously: Two concepts of consumer sovereignty*, Michel Korthals distinguishes between a narrow and a broad liberal conception of consumer sovereignty: “In the narrow liberal view, rights, obligations, and general public debates are core concepts; in the broad liberal view these concepts are supplemented with values, preferences, practices of care, and involvement.” (Korthals 2001) The concept of consumer sovereignty should bridge the division between consumer and citizen, and Korthals argues that the concerns of the consumer in such a conceptualization must include how food is a matter of lifestyle and practices of care – not just individual management of risk, nutrition and price.

In the narrow liberal conception, the autonomy of the informed consumer is the ideal. The consumer should be able to make her food choices based on price and trustworthy information on health and nutritional qualities, as well as fair trade, workers’ rights, animal welfare and sustainability issues. Thus the transparency of the food chain, certified labelling, and explicit articulation of CSR issues is key to enable consumers to act on their right to take informed choices and be good “food citizens” (De Tavernier 2012). In Korthals’ opinion, however, the narrow conception is based on a knowledge-based conception of trust that only partly describes the consumer’s concerns regarding food. Rather than just an individual assessment of price, risk, justice and ecology in front of the supermarket shelves, the food consumer importantly engages with food and food production in relation to questions of life-style and practices of care. These aspects points to a value-based conception of trust, where consumers, producers and the government need more ways to interact and build trust than just public debate.

In this broad conception, trustworthy food production, distribution and consumption are matters of co-production of values and practices of producers, retailers, states and consumer-citizens. The CSR-policies of food market players should be more than an individual consumer choice variable, but essentially be part of a continuing process of education and engagement with the public. In order to make this possible, food market players must be positioned to engage in the co-production of practices, values, quality systems, etc. with consumers, farmers’ organizations, NGOs, governmental bodies and others. The farmers and consumers must likewise be structurally enabled to engage with the state and market players through organizations rather than just as individuals.

In the broad conception of Korthals, the co-operative structure of major players of the Norwegian food market is not remnants from a bygone age: hybrid institutions that reduce consumer choices and obscures transparency of interests, power and legitimacy of decisions. On the contrary, the ownership structure and multifaceted roles of Tine, Nortura and Coop put them in a better position to build a basis for trust and added values in the particular market of food. The membership structure and real influence on the framework conditions of the value chain for farm products in Norway render possible genuine engagement in a field where important individual and collective values and practices are in play, such as health, identity, food culture, animal welfare, and cultural heritage. The increasingly explicit communication of these organizations on social and environmental issues may be seen as attempts to retain the trust of both consumers, farmers and government, but the success of these attempts depend on their ability to balance the different and at times opposing interests they represent.

**Concluding remarks**

In this article, we have presented and discussed the social responsibilities of two central food producers, Tine and Nortura, and one retailer, Coop, in the Norwegian food market. Taking departure from a situation where issues of food safety and food security are increasingly important, we have described how these actors move from implicitly assuming social responsibilities as part of their position in the value chain, towards explicitly expressing social responsibilities as a matter of company-specific values. The three actors presented in this article are all more than just commercial market players. Coop is a consumer cooperative, owned by its 1.4 million members organized in local cooperatives. Tine and Nortura share the triple role of being a cooperative of Norwegian farmers, market regulator and the dominant commercial actor of the Norwegian food sector. The complex roles with at times opposing interests of these actors have been met with criticism from champions of liberal market regulation and consumer autonomy. We have argued that a move from implicit to explicit CSR by food companies could promote vital concerns for the consumer, and given that such a transition does not replace, but rather enforces good control systems, it could support informed consumer choices in an increasingly complex food market. This development should further include collective structures of engagement and coproduction of framework conditions of the special value chain of food that includes producers, retailers, consumers, organizations and governing bodies. The ownership structure and multifaceted roles of Tine, Nortura and Coop in the Norwegian food market make them well placed to contribute to such a collective task.

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**Conflict of interest**

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1. Norway is not part of the EU, but in close cooperation with the EU as part of the European Free Trade Assosciation, ETFA, together with the other EFTA member states Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The KLS requirements address food quality, food safety and animal welfare. See http://www.matmerk.no for further details (in Norwegian) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)