

# Institutional Change in Germany's Farmers Associations: Impacts of the Dairy Conflict

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## ABSTRACT

The abolishment of the milk quota, increasing fluctuation in milk prices and further economic and emotional factors resulted in the so called dairy conflict. The paper focuses specifically on the conflict between the German Farmers' Association and the Federal Dairy Farmers Association resulting in two milk delivery strikes as culmination points within the conflict. Objectives of the study were to analyze the main conflict indicators, the conflict pattern and the process of change in the agricultural association structure in Germany. The basic methodology is a qualitative research approach. Main data collection methods are in-depth interviews and qualitative document analysis. Results show a high cross-linking between the abolishment of the milk quota and identified emotional key drivers. Structural consequences of this conflict can be seen in the reduction of political influence of the German Farmers' Association.

*Keywords: dairy conflict, farmer associations, grounded theory, institutional change, milk strike*

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## 1 Introduction

The dairy sector has to meet the challenges resulting from the process of market liberalization and the ensuring competitive pressures (LUTTER, 2009: 98). Implemented by the European Union in 1984 the dairy milk quota was decided to be abolished in 2015. The dairy milk quota was over decades a regulatory instrument for the milk delivery from dairy farmers to creameries. Thereby from dairy farmers' perspective a delivery guarantee regarding their allocated milk quota.

As a consequence of the abolishment and decreasing milk prices, many dairy farmers lost confidence in the German Farmers' Association, as well as in the European and federal agricultural policy. German dairy farmers reacted with protests and demonstrations. It was a Germany-wide movement with a core area in southern Germany. Important conflict points were the two milk delivery strikes, blockades of streets and creameries, as well as public milk obliteration. The solidarity between farmers suffered, and positions regarding the participation at the milk delivery strike of individual farmers and groups have become more diverse.

According to FEINDT (2010: 255), the dairy conflict is of the agricultural conflicts in the 21 century the one which has been recognized by the public to an above-average extend. Considering the amount of public attention, the number of studies concerning the conflict is relatively small. Because of the paucity of previous research, the study provides an explorative approach.

In one of the few papers, addressing the milk delivery strike, SPILLER and THEUVSEN (2009) analyzed the communication strategy of the Federal Dairy Farmer Association during that time. Their findings show that the communication strategy has been campaign-oriented, media attention to gain public awareness for their position. SPILLER and THEUVSEN (2009: 225) also came to the conclusion that the current discussion

of the milk market policy is increasingly affected by the Federal Dairy Farmers Association. A study by BÖHM and SCHULZE (2010) confirms the high media coverage of the Federal Dairy Farmer Association at the time by a full text search analysis in German newspaper during the height of the conflict from 15 April 2008 to 31 July 2008 (BÖHM and SCHULZE, 2010: 195). The German Farmers' Association as the largest association of farmers only gained a small share in the public attention (BÖHM and SCHULZE, 2010: 201).

Concerning the conflict background, especially the CAP reform and the related abolishment of the dairy milk quota, the literature is significantly broader. LASSEN et al. (2008: 155) expected that the abolishment of the milk quota leads to a transformation of the dairy market in Europe. Therefore milk prices may fluctuate more heavily and, depending on world market prices, are expected to decrease. The abolishment of the milk quota will also impact the structural change towards larger farms. Related to the structural change, HUETTEL and JONGENEEL (2008: 1) outline that farm numbers were declining drastically over the past decades while farm sizes have increased. Overall SPILLER and THEUVSEN (2009: 227) conclude that all model-driven projections of potential developments in the EU dairy market are uncertain. The intensity of the dairy conflict was especially high in southern Germany with its small-scale dairy cattle regions, where milk production is still comparatively small-scale despite the ongoing structural change (KLEINHANSS et al., 2010: 3). Because several farms were already struggling with financial distress, emotionally charged conflicts between farmers and within farm families ensued.

Therefore the aim of this study is to analyze the main conflict indicators, their influence regarding the conflict pattern and the change in the agricultural association structure. The results are based on interviews with involved farmers and experts.

## 2 Dairy Conflict

The conflict between the German Farmers' Association and the Federal Dairy Farmers Association is at the core of the dairy conflict. The root of the conflict between these two associations were the following demands of the Federal Dairy Farmers Association: base price of 43 cent/kg milk, raise of the conversion factor (liter to kilogram from 1.02 to 1.03), creamery contribution of 5 cents for every kg milk delivered for marketing purposes, flexible dairy quota system and milk price reduction for the first kg over delivery (TOP AGRAR ONLINE, 2008a). The German Farmers' Association was not supporting the demands, neither the two milk delivery strikes. The milk delivery strike in 2008 was initiated from the Federal Dairy Farmers Association and both were supported. The lack of support by the German Farmers' Association caused a lot of anger among dairy farmers during that time. Subsequently dairy farmers resigned from the German Farmers' Association and many joined the Federal Dairy Farmers Association.

The most common criticism regarding the German Farmers' Association were close linkage with the industry (e.g., inducement, dependency), lack of credibility, poor communication between the association officials and the members and overall a missing concept for the time after the abolishment of the milk quota. Pointed criticism combined with membership resignation were a new situation for the German Farmers' Association. Before the milk conflict the German Farmers' Association was the opinion leader without any serious competing association in the agricultural sector. But the accelerating structural change led to rising internal protest. Particularly the Federal Dairy Farmer Association benefited from these developments and was focusing its strategy on the disaffection of dairy farmers. In the context of the milk delivery strike the strategy has been to set easily understandable and clear goals (e.g., minimum milk price), communicate fast and with a high-intensity at various levels (e.g., fax, personal conversations, lectures and talks). Members of the German Farmers' Association and non-striking farmers were blaming the Federal Dairy Farmers Association for distorting on opinion formation, as well as exerting pressure and putting forth demands which are not in line with the market.

### Background German Farmers' Association

The history of the German Farmers' Association started on the state level with regional associations. In October 1946, the already existing associations on the state level joint together (SONTOWSKI, 1990: 81). On the federal level, the German Farmers' Association was then established in 1948 as the first "uniform, free and self-determined" professional interest group of farmers (LANDVOLK, no date). Due to the history and the number of members the German Farmers' Association is the largest farmer association in Germany. According to their official website, 300,000 farmers are member in the association (DBV, no date). The structural advantage of the deep-rooted German Farmers' Association within the peasant milieu combined with a unique range of services offered led in the past to a high loyalty level of association members. SONTOWSKI (1990: 180) concludes that a comparatively small number of farmers were willing to leave the German Farmers' Association because of these aspects.

During the dairy conflict many farmers criticized the German Farmers' Association because of its decision not to support the demands of the Federal Dairy Farmers Association during the milk strike. A share of them terminated their membership due to this reason. Despite the fact that interviewed agricultural experts evaluated the demands of the Federal Dairy Farmers Association as unrealistic and unworkable.

### **Background Federal Dairy Farmers Association**

The Federal Dairy Farmers Association was founded in 1998 through a merger of six interest groups in different regions. In February 2004 the Federal Dairy Farmers Association North developed, which merged in 2006 with the Federal Dairy Farmers Association to one governing body. According to their homepage the number of members is around 30.000, one third of the milk producer in Germany (BDM, no date). However, a majority of interviewees stated that this number is out-of-date, and membership is decreasing. There is a lack of reliable numbers, at this point. It is undisputed, however, that the number of members before and during the milk strike has risen sharply, and the media coverage was dominated by the Federal Dairy Farmers Association during this time. Unlike the German Farmers' Association, which represents farmers of all specializations, the Federal Dairy Farmers Association includes only dairy farmers.

## **3 Research Methods**

The study employs a qualitative research approach, based on Grounded Theory. Particular in the social sciences this research approach is widespread and broadly accepted. GLASER and STRAUSS (1967) first introduced the Grounded Theory concept into the research literature. From their point of view, it is a process of discovering theory from data: "In discovering theory, one generates conceptual categories or their properties from evidence, then the evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept" (GLASER and STRAUSS, 1967: 23). They conceptualize the theory development as process, which will be continuously developed further within the research process.

(BITSCH, 2005: 77) summarizes the different phases of theory building in grounded theory: deciding on the research problem, framing the research question, data collection, data coding/analysis, and theory development. During the research process, phases will be repeated iteratively. The process of data collection for generating theory is called theoretical sampling. Throughout the process of theoretical sampling the scientist decides what data to collect next. Basis for decisions is the superior aim of further theory development. Therefore, the emerging theory influences the data collection directly. BITSCH (2005: 79) emphasizes that "sampling concentrates on the systematic variation of conditions during this phase." Throughout the research process categories become theoretically saturated. Which means that additional data does not contribute to further category development and therefore not advance the theory (BITSCH, 2009: 5). Through a comparison of similarities and differences of the data, "properties of conceptual categories are generated" and thereby a more general theory is established (BITSCH, 2009: 4). GLASER and STRAUSS (1967: 32) outline two types of theory generation as part of comparative analysis: substantive theory, which is developed for an empirical area of social inquiry and formal theory for a more conceptual area.

FLICK (1996: 28) summarized the goals of qualitative research as to acquire subjective perspectives, explore interactive social realities and identify cultural framing of social realities. Advantages of qualitative studies according to BITSCH (2009: 3) include the opportunity to allow multiple perspectives and stakeholder views in the research process, and in addition to discovery, the extension or correction of existing theory.

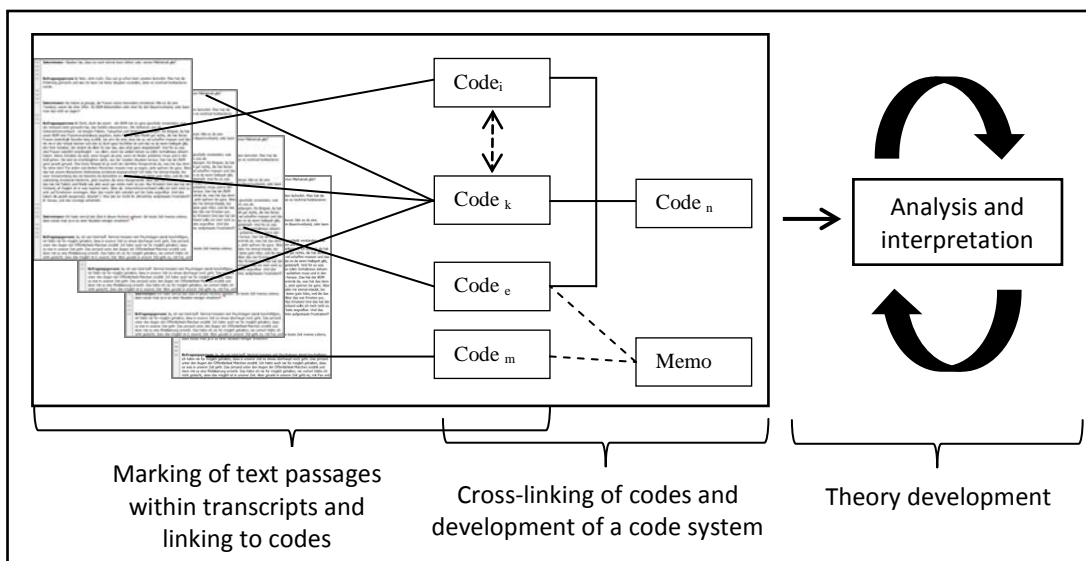
Because of the paucity of research regarding the dairy conflict, this study seeks to analyze the conflict pattern and relevant conflict factors regarding their interconnectedness and structural impact. Data collection included 34 individual, in-depth interviews with farmers, agriculture experts, association experts of the German Farmers' Association and the Federal Dairy Farmer Association, dairy market experts and an agricultural politician, as well as experts in conflict and change management.

The interview length varied between 90-120 minutes. Interviews were structured along the following topics: personal details (e.g., education, work-experience), dairy conflict, association structure (e.g., perceived changes, relevant developments) and overall initiated changes due to the conflict and their potential impact on future developments. The selection of farmers involved members from different associations and with different farm sizes. The regional focus was on the German federal states of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, because the conflict intensity was highest in these small-scale dairy cattle regions. Table 1 gives an overview of the interview groups and the number of interviews.

**Table 1.**  
Overview interviewee groups

Interviewee groups	Number (n=34)
Farmers, farmer spouses, junior farmers	12
Experts of the agricultural sector, e.g., chief editors, institutes members	5
Experts dairy market and creamery CEO's	4
Association officials (German Farmers' Association, Federal Dairy Farmer Assoc.)	9
Experts of conflict and change management	2
Local politicians in agriculture, environment, and rural development	2

Interviews were transcribed, and then further coded and analyzed using the Atlas.ti 7 software for qualitative data analysis. For the analysis, the interview transcripts were marked and a code system enriched with memos was developed in a continuous process. The first step of the analysis process consists of the coding procedure and memo writing. At the beginning of the research process, codes are developed in an open coding practice. Early in the process, codes are generated during the reading of the interview transcripts. In the following research steps, existing codes are linked through text marks to further interview transcripts and supplemented by others. Over the research process, new codes can be added, codes can be deleted, renamed, and several other existing codes can be merged (FRIESE, 2012). In further steps, the codes are associated with each other during theory development. Figure 1 (extended and modified based on GLÄSER and LAUDEL, 2009) shows the process of theory development starting from the developing of codes and linking them to marked text passages of the interview transcript, the development of a code system (cross-linking / merging) and the analysis and interpretation as an ongoing process.



**Figure 1.** Research process (Source: GLÄSER and LAUDEL, 2009: 44)

#### 4 Results

The following chapter presents the research results, subdivided into three sections. The first section describes the conflict events as they developed over time, based on the analysis of newspapers and journal articles regarding the dairy conflict. The second section deals with the results of the conflict analysis, focusing on the key factors. The third section summarizes the perceived changes within and after the dairy conflict focusing on the change in the agricultural association structure in Germany.

#### 4.1 Conflict Pattern

The first prominent public events were protests and demonstrations of farmers in streets and in front of political institutions (FLZ, 2007: 15). The main demand of the Federal Dairy Farmers Association, a base price of 43 Cent/kg milk, was marked by signs with the minimum milk price on it. After an internal strike vote in April 2008 with 88% support (JASPER, 2009: 24), the management of the Federal Dairy Farmers Association announced a milk delivery strike lasting ten days from the May 27, 2008 and ending with a protest rally in Berlin (STEINBACH, 2009: 32). A multitude of farmers from cooperative creameries were participating in the milk delivery strike, and many of them actively blocked their own creameries (ABL, 2009: 15). This was an initial event of the conflict, which caused media announcements and membership resignations by members of the German Farmers' Association (TOP AGRAR ONLINE, 2008b). Farmers were complaining that the association was not supporting the campaign of the Federal Dairy Farmers Association or the dairy farmers in their entirety.

Due to the media attention, the Federal Dairy Farmers Association accomplished an increasing public and political discussion. Furthermore, a small group of female farmers were going on a hunger strike, in front of the chancellery to garner attention for their situation (SPILLER and THEUVSEN, 2009: 225). A further relevant development happened in November 2008, when a larger group of supporters from the Federal Dairy Farmers Association were burning a corn dolly in the so called "Haberfeldtreiben" not far of the president house of the German Farmers' Association (SÜDDEUTSCHE, 2008: 45). Public pressure led the Officials from the Federal Dairy Farmers Association distance themselves from this action later on. Due to decreasing prices, protests in front of the chancellery restarted in May 2009 (STEINBACH, 2009: 32) and the streets around the house of the President from the German Farmers' Association were covered with written threats. In September 2009, another milk delivery strike took place in France supported by the neighboring countries (e.g., Germany, Belgium, Austria, Luxembourg) (NÜRNBERGER, 2010: 25), but this time with a significantly lower participation level in Germany, according to the observations of the majority persons interviewed. With public milk destruction campaigns, the Federal Dairy Farmers Association achieved high public attention. This incited a debate of fair milk prices and caused several confrontations. The following modified and with two conflict events extended table 2 shows the different events over time.

**Table 2.**  
Important conflict events (Source: STEINBACH, 2009: 32)

	<i>Point in time</i>	<i>Event (place)</i>
2008	May	Demonstration for milk delivery strike (Freising)
	May 27 – June 5	1 <sup>st</sup> Milk delivery strike (Germany - nationwide)
	June	Closing rally (Berlin)
	November	„Haberfeldtreiben“
2009	April	Demonstrations in front of creameries
	May	Hungerstrike (Berlin)
	June	Demonstration (Brussels)
	September	2 <sup>nd</sup> Milk delivery strike (e.g., France, Germany)

#### 4.2 Key drivers of the dairy conflict

The multiple factors responsible for the developments during the dairy conflict were rather diverse. The following figure 2 displays the identified root causes, effects and resultant consequences. The figure is based on statements from interviewed dairy farmers, association and agricultural experts.

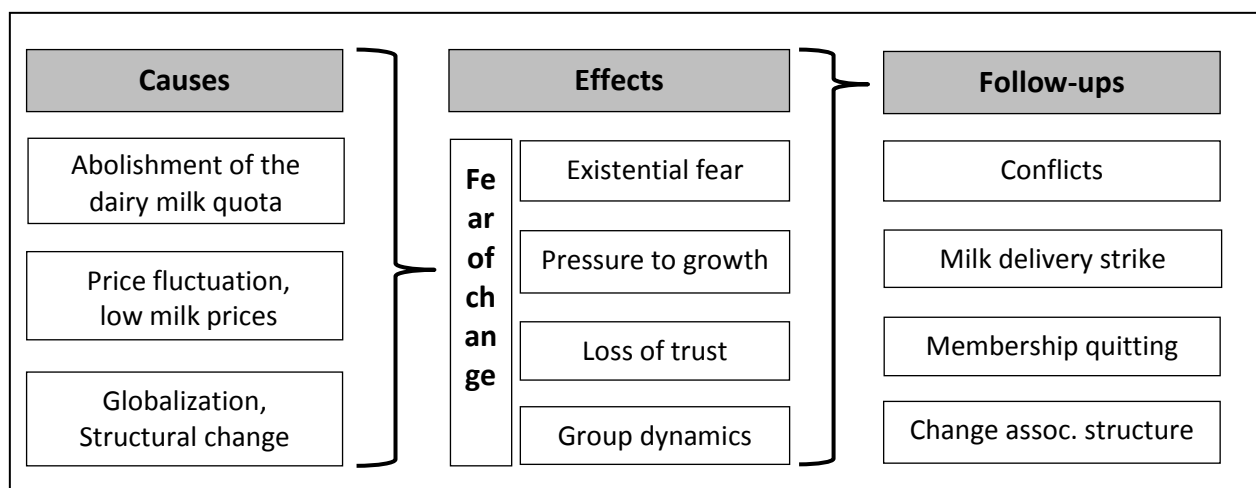


Figure 2. Correlation of identified conflict factors

Referring to the main conflict causes and conflict background, most interviewees consider the market liberalization and, especially the abolishment of the milk quota regime as important. In this context interviewed dairy farmers mentioned increasing price fluctuation, low milk prices and, as a consequence of globalization, a rising pressure to expand. Further into conflict, the emotional motivations gained more and more impact on the conflict development, especially in the conflict phases covering the hunger strike and public milk destruction.

One major result of the conflict analysis is the strong connection of the economic factors with the fear of change of many dairy farmers. In times of the dairy milk quota, the dairy farmers had relatively constant market conditions and a delivery guarantee. Therefore insecurity is connected with the current structural changes (e.g., abolishment of dairy milk quota, globalization). Asked about the fear of change, interviewed dairy farmer specified the existential fear and often negative future prospective as main drivers. Further described effects closely connected to the fear of change were pressure to grow, loss of trust and an enormous group dynamic (e.g., pressure to participate in the milk delivery strike, protests, and blockades of creameries). Some examples of the group dynamics are conflicts in farm families and between generations within a farm household, as well as between colleagues regarding the decision of participating in the milk delivery strike. Most of the interviewees determined that the strong group dynamics are an important reason for the membership growth of the Federal Dairy Farmers Association during that time and a key factor for the number of striking farmers. Interviewed non-striking farmers complained about other farmers trying to influence their decision to participate in the milk delivery strike. As a result, several interviewed dairy farmers participated in the last days of the milk delivery strike, due to repeated visits from striking farmers.

Consequences were conflicts between the involved association German Farmers' Association and Federal Dairy Farmers Association and as well between farmers and within families. A milk delivery strike with a high participation level, the resignation of memberships and therefore changes in the association structure in Germany. Narrated developments were an increasing pressure to resign membership in the German Farmers' Association, particular from members of the Federal Dairy Farmers Association. Regarding the conflict aftermath, dairy farmers mentioned a decreased feeling of community and lack in trust regarding the involved agricultural associations, as well as the politics. In many villages lasting conflicts ensued. From interviewees' point of view the feeling of community is decreasing since the dairy conflict. They complain about a declining willingness to cooperate with each other and lower participation in common events. Many farmers made the decision to focus more on themselves, and the neighbor is perceived increasingly as competitor.

#### 4.3 Perceived changes in the association structure

Concerning the German Farmers' Association, the majority of the interviewed dairy farmers believe that the association has lost its role as opinion leader and main representative of German farmers, particularly regarding milk and environmental issues. Interviewed experts trace this back to an evolving collective, which consists of more than twenty different organizations, especially regarding the fields of environmental protection, animal welfare and development aid. Important players within are the Federal Dairy Farmers Association and the Friends of the Earth Germany. The assessment of these developments is controversial. Some interviewees classify it as positive. They argue that the organizational structure of the German Farmer's Association is called into question, and that there will be improvements due to the

discussion process. They also claim that competition is important and that the new constellation expresses the different opinions within the sector. Regarding the organizational development of the Federal Dairy Farmers Association interviewed dairy farmers are skeptical. The role of the Federal Dairy Farmers Association as opinion leader regarding milk issues can only be imagined by few interviewees. But because of the decreasing number of members, respondents estimate a stronger connection of the Federal Dairy Farmers Association to the Friends of the Earth Germany, Working group of peasant agriculture (AbL) and others as a strategic scheme of the Federal Dairy Farmers Association to preserve influence. This development is perceived very critically by the majority of the farmers. They are afraid that the Federal Dairy Farmers Association will play a minor role compared to other member organizations. As a result, the demands of the dairy farmers could be underrepresented because of the weak position within the alliance. Interviewed experts are warning that the development will weaken the position of the agricultural sector in political discussions and policy development.

Most interviewees assess functioning collaboration between the Federal Dairy Farmers Association and the German Farmers' Association as unrealistic until a replacement of the leadership in both associations. Collaboration at the lower levels seems to work regionally, but the mutual distrust due to the conflict still exists. Because of the many substantive differences in the majority of important topics, only minor collaborations have occurred before and after the milk delivery strike.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusions

The dairy conflict was emotionally charged, with the two milk delivery strikes in 2008 and 2009. Particular farmers with small-scale family farms were expecting a lot from the milk delivery strike as "their last chance" and were hopeful for a future with better milk prices. Afterwards the majority were disappointed and resigned from the Federal Dairy Farmers Association. In consequence there was a loss of confidence and higher skepticism regarding political decisions. Some conflicts are enduring and make the cooperation among farmers in villages and between the involved associations difficult.

Important key drivers identified were the abolishment of the dairy milk quota, low milk prices and the proceeding structural change, closely related with the fear of change. The fear of change underlines the argument of many farmers regarding their insecurity about what will happen after the abolishment of the dairy milk quota in 2015 on the market and their own prospect.

The conflict is seen by many interviewees as one important culmination point within a broader development in the agricultural association structure. Interviewed experts pointed out that the agricultural discussion in politics is transforming towards a more pluralistic opinion formation, where more parties will impact the public discussion. Structural consequences of the conflict can be seen in the differentiation regarding Germany's association structure. Whereas, the rising influence of a collective of environment, animal welfare and development aid organizations is perceived as an important development, and relevant for further changes in representation of agriculture interests. Farmers perceive this development skeptical and are worried about the impact regarding the presentation and perception of the agriculture sector in public and politics. The main consequence, is the more pluralistic opinion formation and the realization that the broader range of farm sizes, reflects in more diverse interests of farmers. Conflicting interests such as growth versus sustainability or change versus continuity are the basis for potential future conflicts.

Overall the conflict shows that the German Farmers' Association had to realize, that the abolishment of the market regulation must be more detailed discussed and communicated regarding the affected dairy farmers - especially concerning future options and consequences. In retrospective, the late response and intervention of the German Farmers' Association was the most important reason for the high conflict intensity. Beside a good communication strategy, crucial conflict prevention would have been an early recognition of conflict indicators and to address emotional aspects. In the course of the dairy conflict, expert opinions (e.g., agriculture experts, association officials, politicians) were hardly noticed by the participating Federal Dairy Farmers Association officials and the majority of the striking farmers due to the emotional development. As the dairy conflict shows, with increasing conflict intensity the intervention options are decreasing and fact-based discussion is hardly possible.

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