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Case-findings from Interviews with Danish Food Sector Executives on Their Responsibility in Counteracting Overweight and Obesity

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1. Summary

Traditional forms of representative democracy are being supplemented by “dual governance” and “self regulation” approaches in which the food sector is expected to engage in preventive measures. In order to explore the nature of this type of engagement in the Danish food sector, a study based on telephone interviews was conducted among Danish food sector stakeholders who had participated in the Danish Obesity Summit. The results show a tendency that the more the products is in focus as contributing to overweight and obesity, the more the food sector interviewees are in favour of giving the consumers the responsibility in avoiding obesity and the less active roles they see for business and government. On the other hand, companies that have taken initiatives see the roles of business and government as much more active. The findings suggest that there is a need for more research about how dual governance policy making and measures can be used to counteract unhealthy eating.

Keywords: healthy eating, self regulation, food industry, corporate nutritional responsibility, dual governance

2. Extended Abstract

The increasing incidence of overweight and obesity (International Obesity Task Force, 2004) has placed preventive strategies on the top of the public health nutrition agenda in many countries. Governmental authorities and institutions try to influence the behaviour of citizens towards healthier eating habits and lifestyles. But according to contemporary political science, modern “network” societies experience a development in which governments, NGOs and business interact and govern in new way to addresses important societal issues. “Policy communities” and “issue

networks” (Bogason & Zøllner, 2007) is used as terms to characterise these new policy making entities. In counteracting obesity and overweight the role of non-public actors such as industry and business organisations have increasingly been given attention and traditional representative forms of democracy seems to some extent to have been supplemented by “dual governance” (Lang, 2007), self regulation (Marsden et al, 1998) and partnerships (Mikkelsen & Trolle, 2004), where stakeholders in the food sector increasingly are engaging in private nutritional or diet related schemes. Although this kind of self-regulation is the dominant way of EU regulation in a number of adjacent areas, e.g. food safety and environmental standards, public health experts have mostly been sceptical about the role the food sector could play in promoting a healthy diet. In order to explore the nature of the engagement of food sector stakeholders in counteracting overweight and obesity, a study was conducted among Danish food sector stakeholders who had participated in the Danish Obesity Summit (www.fedetopmoede.dk). The aim was to analyse what kind of responsibility Danish food sector executives see as necessary in relation to overweight and obesity. The focus was on identification of types of ongoing initiatives and mapping of the stakeholders’ views on necessary additional initiatives, including who should take such initiatives. The study was based on qualitative telephone interviews with 16 of the commercial participants among the 48 participants in the Danish Obesity Summit 2005. The results show differences in the perception of the necessary initiatives and in the practice of different stakeholders in relation to overweight and obesity. There is a tendency that the more the products, which the interview person is responsible for or representing, are in focus as contributing to overweight and obesity, the more is the person in favour of giving the consumers the responsibility in avoiding obesity and overweight and not on taking an active role as business. Furthermore, these stakeholders see the role of the government as primarily providing information and not taking more active roles like supporting product development or implementing different levels of tax on different types of food. On the other hand, companies that have taken initiatives like reducing the fat content in products or represent products that are not so much in focus as contributing to obesity, see the role of business and government as much more active. The findings show the need for more research about how dual governance policy making and measures can be used to counteract unhealthy eating.

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