

FOOD AND WELFARE

Nordic nutrition policy and the current paradox of regulating obesity in Norway

ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the shifting character of food and nutrition policy in the Nordic countries, as a more or less integrated part of welfare policies. Nutrition emerged as an area of public policy-making with the food supply crises during World War I and the interwar conflicts around welfare and the role of the state. We argue that contemporary nutrition policies, which focus on motivating people to make healthy lifestyle choices, represent a break with the earlier public health and welfare oriented policies. In this chapter we discuss, first, nutrition and welfare in general terms. This is followed by a presentation of the emergence and institutionalization of Nordic nutrition policies. We identify three phases in Nordic nutrition policies, representing a gradual shift from policy based on food supply to public health and further to market-based solutions. The last part of the chapter addresses contemporary nutrition policy, illustrated by how obesity has been handled in Norwegian nutrition policy, a policy based mainly on individual lifestyle choices and self-responsibility typical of liberalist approaches. From a welfare point of view, it is paradoxical that the regulation of obesity focuses on motivating and educating people to make healthy choices when obesity is largely a problem of social inequality, and an emphasis on individual responsibility will most likely strengthen rather than reduce these tendencies.

KEYWORDS: Nutrition policy, welfare, obesity, social inequality, Norway