

**Exit, Voice, and Loyalty in the Case of Farmer Associations:  
Decision-Making of Dairy Farmers during the German Milk Conflict**

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**Abstract**

The abolishment of the dairy milk quota, increasing fluctuation of milk prices, and the ongoing structural change in the European milk sector led to the so-called milk conflict. Farmers reacted with protests, membership resignation from the German Farmers' Association and milk delivery strikes. This qualitative study analyzes dairy farmers' decision-making under pressure regarding their association membership and their participation in the milk delivery strike. Data include 34 in-depth interviews with farmers and experts. Results show that rising dissatisfaction and exerted pressure by members of the Federal Dairy Farmers Association resulted in decreasing loyalty and voice, and higher likelihood of exit.

**Key words:** decision making, EVL, grounded theory, Hirschman, milk conflict, peer pressure

**JEL:** Q13, Q18, Z13

# **Exit, Voice, and Loyalty in the Case of Farmer Associations: Decision-Making of Dairy Farmers during the German Milk Conflict**

## **Introduction**

The German milk conflict has been an emotionally charged conflict within the dairy industry, between 2007 and 2009. The conflict mirrors a nation-wide movement with its core area in southern Germany. Culmination points of the conflict were two milk delivery strikes, blockades of streets and creameries, as well as public milk obliterations. Relevant factors during the course of the conflict were declining milk prices and increasing price volatility. Furthermore, based on the enacted abolishment of the dairy milk quota, planned for April 1, 2015, uncertainty regarding the market development after the deregulation ensued. Many dairy farmers lost confidence in the German Farmers' Association (DBV) representing them and the agricultural policy on the federal and the European levels. Besides the economic impact factors, social aspects (farm succession, village community, and value system) and psychological factors (fear of change, peer pressure, and solidarity) played an important role. During this stage the Federal Dairy Farmers' Association (BDM) presented a relatively new option for representing dairy farmers, enabling them to express their frustration concerning their income and the political developments. The smaller organization, BDM, managed to create and sustain an emotionalized movement and initiated the milk strike.

Lack of support for the strike from the DBV caused anger among dairy farmers. As a consequence, many dairy farmers resigned from the DBV and joined the BDM. Prior to this development the DBV had been the opinion leader and representative of German farmers, without any serious competition (Landvolk, no date). The DBV represents 300.000 members and was founded in 1948, therefore it is the largest and oldest farmer association in Germany (DBV, no date). In contrast, the BDM was founded in 1998 and represented 30.000 members during the height of the conflict (BDM, no date). Despite the difference in size between the two associations, the BDM dominated the media coverage during the conflict and was able to mobilize the majority its members.

The objectives of this study are to analyze decision-making of affected dairy farmers with a focus on the exit-decision regarding DBV memberships and the participation in the milk delivery strike. The analysis builds on and expands the exit, voice and loyalty theory (EVL) of Hirschman (1970).

## **Literature Review**

Three fields of research are relevant to this analysis: classical conflict research, research concerning the EVL approach, and research related to cultural characteristics of farmers' behavior in conflict situations. Recent studies in the field of general conflict, focus on factors in conflict development and conflict communication. Relevant factors include trust, solidarity, and personal values. Greenberg (2003) emphasizes trust as an extraordinary important factor. Solidarity is highlighted by Coser (1972), stating that solidarity increases within the same social stratum. In this context, Krysmanski (1971) confirms that social cohesion of a group increases during external conflicts, if shared values and a functioning group structure exist.

Hirschman's (1970) EVL model is used in a variety of disciplines. The basic EVL theory consists of the factors exit, voice, and loyalty. In a later expansion of the model, neglect was introduced (EVLN model). Exit means withdrawal from an organization or reduced consumption of a specific product. Voice represents a constructive or destructive feedback about an unsatisfactory condition related to an organization (Hirschman, 1970). Loyalty is understood to be the solidarity to an organization, product, or manufacturer and is differentiated into active and passive loyalty. Neglect describes negative organizational citizenship (Withey and Cooper, 1989). Hirschman's model is based on a customer or employee perspective in the context of products. In this study the model is transferred to associations and their members.

This study builds on the first EVL model, since neglect does not fit with the analyzed conflict. Overall the two elements voice and loyalty are evaluated as constructive behaviors while exit and neglect are destructive behaviors. Concerning the exit element, Grima and Glaymann (2012) mentioned that a withdrawal from an organization can be closely linked to a decline in income, loss of reputation, fear of reprisal, and also emotional outbursts. Given alternatives, employees are more independent, and therefore, the likelihood of exit increases (Grima and Glaymann, 2012). Another relevant factor concerning the exit decision is the belief whether performance improvement is likely. Dissatisfied persons have to decide if they remain silent or protest (Kolarska and Howard, 1980). In contrast, voice can be seen as an attempt to improve the situation. Typical interactions through voice can be complaints to the management, as well as protests and actions to influence the public opinion (Hirschman, 1970). The likelihood of voice increases with loyalty. Hence loyalty can be characterized as a decisive influence on the choice between exit and voice.

Fassnacht et al. (2010) mentioned that the agricultural sector is shaped by family businesses, characterized by the co-existence of emotionality (family) and rationality (business). Family business require multiple roles of the persons involved. Concerning farmers' behavior in crisis situations, Feindt (2010) illustrates that limited adaptability of farm managers correlates with the termination of many family farms. The farmers with limited adaptability tend to blame others in crisis situations, increase their practical activity, and often ignore new threats.

## **Methods**

The study is based on a qualitative research approach because of its advantages in exploring lived reality. Further reasons for choosing a qualitative approach were the possibility to allow multiple perspectives within the research process and to acquire subjective perspectives. Both aspects are important in this analysis. The research procedure is based on the Grounded Theory concept introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Bitsch (2009: 3) emphasized that "(...) although grounded theory is typically framed in the context of discovery and theory development, its usefulness also extends to qualification and correction of existing theory where in-depth understanding of the actors' perspectives is paramount." According to Bitsch (2005) the grounded theory process can be subdivided in the following recursive steps: deciding on a research problem, framing the research question, data collection, data coding and analysis, and theory development. The process of data collection for developing theory is called theoretical sampling. During this phase the researcher collects, codes, and analyzes data, and decides with respect to which parts of the developing theory data is not yet sufficient. Thus, the researcher has to determine what data to

collect next, with the overall aim to evolve the theory. This process controls the amount of data collection deemed necessary (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:45). During the sampling phase, the researcher must ensure the systematic variation of conditions (Bitsch, 2005).

The data basis of this study includes a total of 34 interviews, which were conducted in person with an average length between 1.5 and 2 hours. The interviews focused on perception of the milk conflict, the decision-making during the milk conflict and the conflict tactics of the associations involved. The regional focus of the interviews was Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, as the main conflict area due to smaller farm sizes than the rest of Germany. Interviewees included dairy farmers, agricultural experts, association officials, and experts of conflict and change management. Some of the experts and association officials were also part-time farmers. Variation of the dairy farmer interviewees included region, farm size, and age and association membership. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Transcripts amount to about 800 pages. The next step covered the coding of the transcripts in the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. The software is designed for a systematic development of the code system during the data analysis. During this phase, an inductive code system was developed based on the interview content, as well as the EVL model. The code system is essential to analyze, categorize, and interpret the data.

## **Results**

Despite the expert knowledge of the researchers on the milk conflict, and also further information from both the scientific literature, as well as trade journals and newspapers, results build mainly on the in-depth analysis of the interview transcripts. The first part is focused on the decision-making of dairy farmers regarding resignation of their DBV membership. The second part covers decision-making concerning participation in the milk strike. Explanations are based on multiple analyses of the interview transcripts and are illustrated by statements of interviewees. In both parts, dairy farmers are divided into a convinced group and a pressured group. The convinced group includes dairy farmers who sympathized with the BDM and therefore were dissatisfied with the DBV. The pressured group includes dairy farmers who felt forced toward an exit or strike decision by BDM supporters.

### **Decision-making of dairy farmers regarding DBV membership resignation**

The analysis is subdivided into the EVL classification of dairy farmers' actions during the milk strike and impact factors on the likelihood of exit. Hirschman's (1970) EVL model is transferred to the analyzed conflict between the associations. The classification serves to structure farmers' actions during the conflict. The different categories of the model are defined according to the context analyzed and the empirical base is illustrated with quotes from interview statements. Based on the detailed analysis of the interview transcripts, the EVL model has been adapted to the organizational context (agricultural associations and their members) and, furthermore, modified to better reflect farmers' actions in detail.

### *EVL classification of dairy farmers' membership decisions*

Dairy farmers' actions during the milk conflict fit the EVL model. For the dairy farmers' decision-making, the exit category can be differentiated into three subcategories. The first subcategory, convinced exits, comprises dairy farmers who resigned their DBV membership due to conviction. Typical for this group is a simultaneous application for BDM membership. The lack of support of the DBV for the BDM requests, dissatisfaction with the DBV and with the economic developments are reasons for their decisions. Additional exit reasons were the lack of identification with the DBV president at the time and the upper DBV management in general. The second exit subcategory comprises dairy farmers who resigned their DBV membership based on pressure (pressured exit). In most cases the exit decision of dairy farmers was due to the perceived pressure to participate in BDM organized membership resignation events or to sign a pre-drafted letter of resignation promoted by the BDM. The third subgroup did also exit under pressure, but silently withdrew from the exit (silent withdrawal from exit). The silent withdrawal group comprises pressured farmers who attempted to rejoin the DBV without losing face in the community. Accordingly, the reentry was not disclosed, so that others could not immediately recognize their change of mind. They cancelled their resignations orally contacting DBV officials.

The voice category also consists of three subcategories: claimed voice, voluntary voice, and destructive voice. Claimed voice represents the demand for feedback from DBV officials because of the lack of feedback that they had received. Members were approached with the request for feedback from DBV officials. Interviewed association experts reported that a lot of farmers struggled to explain their reasons for the exit. Voluntary voice was most important for the DBV to realize the level of dissatisfaction and to gain insights into how to respond to it. During the milk strike, voluntary voice was on a very low level. Reasons for the missing voice were the emotional conflict development, as well as the fear to get personally involved in the conflict. Altogether the milk conflict was dominated by destructive voice explained by dissatisfaction, fear, anger, and emotional upheaval. The destructive voice was exercised mainly by members of the convinced group who often had already become BDM members.

Loyalty is subdivided into active and passive loyalty. Active loyalty includes convinced DBV members who were supporting the DBV in public and not participating in the milk strike. Active loyalty was shown by a minority of DBV members during the conflict. Passive loyalty represents dairy farmers who agreed with the DBV, but did not support it publicly. As a reason for their passivity many interviewees mentioned peer pressure, threats, and the public opinion against the DBV. Loyalty is closely tied with the quantity and quality of voice. The extent of loyalty is often related to the belief in the ability of the DBV to change. Therefore, a close relationship between passive loyalty and decreasing voice could be identified concerning the farmers interviewed. Table 1 shows the different categories and subcategories, their definitions, and examples of interview statements.

Table 1: EVL decision making of dairy farmers

Categories		Definitions	Statements
Exit	<b>Convinced Exit</b>	Actual resignation of the DBV membership often linked to joining the BDM	<p><i>“We did not feel represented”</i> (farmer 12, BDM).</p> <p><i>“I only saw a lack of will on the side of the DBV to react accordingly. They saw no need, they simply said, fine, it will happen like that and that’s it”</i> (dairy expert 4).</p> <p><i>“[...] they said, I am disappointed, you betrayed me, I resign”</i> (association expert 7, DBV).</p>
	<b>Pressured Exit</b>	Participation in mass membership resignations due to BDM members requests and pressure	<p><i>“That means for three weeks they went from house to house in the village and persuaded people that they should sign”</i> (farmer 1, DBV).</p> <p><i>“A BDM membership is free of charge. How will it cost me nothing? You just take the 40 € off from the DBV, or better, you quit there and have even saved money was the argument”</i> (dairy expert 5).</p>
	<b>Silent Withdrawal from Exit</b>	Exit under pressure and afterwards silent withdrawal from exit; trying to hide the withdrawal from the community	<p><i>“[...] first everyone exited, and in the end everyone is claiming and saying, we have signed that too, but we would like to stay members, however no one should know”</i> (farmer 1, DBV).</p> <p><i>“This is really a big issue. So, once they announce, I have now resigned, and then reenter, but you have been the biggest shouter and you have encouraged us, and now you are a traitor or defector [...]”</i> (dairy expert 5).</p>
Voice	<b>Claimed Voice</b>	Feedback demanded by DBV officials from resigning members who became BDM members	<p><i>“Okay, that is everyone’s free choice, but still you are also an active volunteer. You sit down there now, and write me a letter and write down to me [...] what bothers you. [...] You want to achieve something! So please write to me what exactly bothers you. Well, then, I got a call a few days later [...]. Because they could not say in detail what was bothering them”</i> (farmer 1, DBV).</p>
	<b>Voluntary Voice</b>	Unrequested feedback towards DBV officials concerning the positioning of the DBV or the mood at the grass root level, with the goal of finding a solution	<p><i>“I went to BDM events frequently, in the beginning. I am now also in the Milk Committee or in the district for the DBV, because I simply believe that you have to listen to all sides and if you are not complaining than you won’t be heard [...]”</i> (farmer 13, BDM/DBV).</p>

	<b>Destructive Voice</b>	Unrequested feedback to DBV officials without taking the DBV's perspective into account and with the goal of imposing own opinion	<i>"[...] he read publicly at a meeting his resignation from the DBV. Everyone knows he has worked for years for this association"</i> (association expert 1). <i>"The DBV completely missed out on taking the membership with them concerning the milk policy"</i> (farmer 3, BDM). <i>"[DBV president] was a very fame-hungry person"</i> (dairy expert 2).
<b>Loyalty</b>	<b>Active loyalty</b>	Convinced DBV members, supporting the DBV publicly, not participating in the milk strike	<i>"Communality, well, I mean, the DBV as a whole is surely the right institution for us farmers, a good thing"</i> (farmer 11).
	<b>Passive loyalty</b>	Agrees to the DBV's perspective, but because of the public opinion against the DBV does not publicly support it	<i>"I could tell you about villages in the [...] region, where nobody dared to say, no, I will not drive to the BDM demonstration [...]. There was a certain peer pressure"</i> (farmer 9, DBV).

### ***Identified impact factors on the likelihood of exit***

Concerning the EVL model, decreasing loyalty and lack of voice are indicators of a decision process leading to the exit decision, but to get to this state specific conditions have to be met. As origin for decreasing loyalty, dissatisfaction was mentioned by all interviewees. Especially dairy farmers belonging to the convinced group described dissatisfaction as a trigger for their decreasing loyalty and the resulting destructive feedback or absence of voice. Consequently, destructive voice by critical members dominated the further conflict development. To explain destructive voice, interviewees cited the loss of trust in the DBV and its ability to change the strategy toward the support of the BDM requests. In the beginning, farmers were still convinced that changes in the DBV would occur, and, therefore, tried to foster change through constructive feedback. But with increasing pressure and lack of success, the feedback level decreased or became more destructive concerning. Several farmers claimed to use exit as an implicit voice function to initiate an impulse for development within the DBV. The overall dissatisfaction with the DBV resulted from dairy farmers' perception of the DBV as an inactive association concerning the market liberalization, especially the abolishment of the dairy milk quota and the increasing milk price volatility. Loyalty was further decreased by the existence of the BDM, which was perceived as an alternative to the DBV during the milk conflict.

Figure 1 depicts the decision-making process of dairy farmers to exit the DBV. The likelihood of exiting during the milk conflict increased with rising dissatisfaction with the economic situation and was also affected by the availability of the alternative association. In a negative cycle, growing dissatisfaction led to decreasing loyalty and more passive members. In consequence, the BDM swayed the public opinion against the DBV. Further, the quantity of voice decreased or became destructive. Resulting in a DBV exit or apathy toward the association policy.

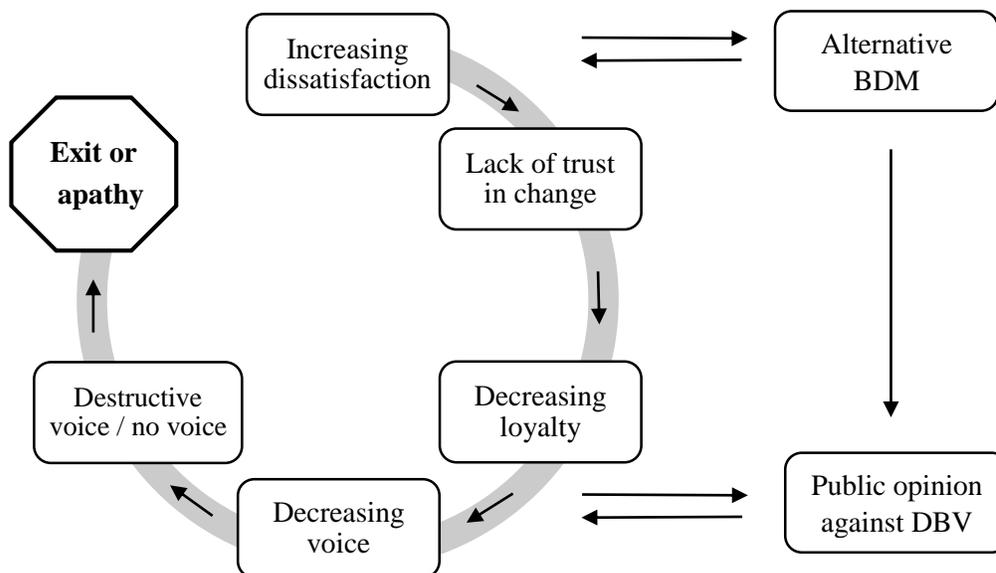


Figure 1: Chain of causality: likelihood of DBV exit (convinced group)

### Decision-making of dairy farmers concerning milk strike participation

Since the first part of the results analyzed the decision process to exit the DBV, the second part focusses on the decision-making concerning a participation in the milk strike. Milk strike participation was closely connected to the exit decision. For many farmers in the convinced group the DBV exit also meant participation in the milk strike. The lack of support by the DBV for the milk strike has been listed as one of the main exit reasons by resigning DBV members.

With respect to the strike participation, the distinction between the convinced group and the pressured group of farmers is important. The decision-making process to participate in the milk strike of the convinced group of dairy farmers is analyzed first, followed by the decision-making of dairy farmers belonging to the pressured group. One group of farmers participated in the milk strike due to the pressure. Another group of farmers did not participate despite the pressure out of a “now less than ever” attitude.

#### *Decision-making of the convinced group*

Similar to the exit decision process of the convinced group, the dissatisfaction with the price development was important in the participation decision. Another reason to participate in the milk strike was curiosity to try strike as a protest form. Furthermore, several of the dairy farmers interviewed stated, that they were impressed by BDM events they participated in. For example one interviewee explicitly stressed the process dynamic.

*“There has been an incredible group dynamic. [...] So, in some villages - not all - there were participants who are saying that it was the best time in their lives. This is also true, because they*

*have met every day in someone's home, cooked together, and looked up the latest news from the internet. Being mean, you could say, that is a cult, it was similar to a cult" (farmer 1, DBV).*

The own authenticity was mentioned repeatedly by dairy farmers as important personal motivation to participate in the milk strike, especially if they were BDM members. They wanted to act as role models for undecided farmers, and thereby support the BDM. In addition, the participation in the milk strike provided the opportunity to the dairy farmers of the convinced group to see what they could achieve together. Hence, several farmers explained their decision for the milk strike as an investment in their future.

*"The other thing is, you have to know [...] which opportunities are there, and what the limits are. What has been really, really important for the milk strike was to get a feel how the creameries react. That was very important. And also how politicians react, and the consumer reacts" (farmer 8, DBV).*

Broader objectives of the participating dairy farmers were to gain public attention and increase pressure on policy makers. Farmers wanted to claim a position of power as milk producers in the dairy value chain. Overall the decision-making was influenced by a wide variety of emotions due to the emotionally charged conflict.

### ***Decision to participate under pressure***

This group of farmers took part in the milk strike due to peer pressure or did not participate. The pressure was exercised through different actions, such as abuse, hate mail, threats, strike control through following of milk collection trucks, or the termination of business relationships. Therefore, several farmers participated in the end phase of the milk strike, although they did not support it.

*"[...] a pull effect was definitely there, and then for many who had a hard time deciding, they thought then, yeah well, if I do not participate now, I will be left standing alone, and, therefore, I rather participate" (farmer 7, BDM).*

Many farmers of the pressured group described emotional distress. They felt forced by convinced BDM members toward a decision to participate, as this statement from one of the experts interviewed illustrates.

*"There was pressure exercised on the people, also as a mass pressure, where we have said, and where this black and white theme, you can only be for us or against us, and there is nothing in-between. [...] this group pressure I have experienced as really undesirable" (conflict expert 1).*

Besides the peer pressure, another groups exerted pressure on farmers' decision-making process. The peer pressure resulted in discussions within the families of the farmers.

*"Within the family, the pressure was rather high, from relatives too, and former farm managers. [...] other family members [...] they even said, they pay the milk money to me, just to, well, protect the [family] name" (farmer 5, DBV).*

As actions to influence and convince dairy farmers to participate in the milk strike, in particular, continuous threats were described. Threatening actions included break-ins with opening of milk containers of other farmers, traitor slogans sprayed on houses, and illegal drugs put on milk containers. DBV officials were threatened with mass membership resignations, if they would not personally participate in the milk strike.

*“[...] if milk will not be poured, all DBV members from the village resign. You lose about 100 members or pour the milk, what should you do?”* (dairy expert 3).

Altogether, the farmers interviewed from the group who felt under pressure named a wide variety of perceptions concerning their decision-making. A recurring perception was the wish to demonstrate solidarity, which was closely connected to the personal aim of preserving the own standing within the community. Further perceptions triggered by the pressure exercised from BDM members were fear and an inability to cope with the situation. Many DBV farmers were concerned to lose their standing in the community or with other farmers, if they did not participate in the milk strike. They were afraid of endangering long-term relationships with other farmers and were in a quandary due to family conflicts concerning their participation. The conflict between the older and younger generation was quoted by the older generation. They were against the milk strike and thereby also against the destruction of food. Their main arguments were based on their personal experience during the war and periods of food shortages. Typically the younger generation was more enthusiastic about the milk strike as a drastic protest form compared to banners or demonstrations. The majority of interviewees in this group described negative perceptions, such as fear, pressure, threats, or concern.

### ***Decision to not participate, despite pressure***

Reasons to not participate in the milk strike were disagreement with the BDM demands and a management focus on farm growth. Interviewees of this group of farmers hesitated to breach the contract with creameries. Especially with respect to the second milk strike, several interviewees specified that based on their experiences of frustration during the first milk strike, they did not want to participate again.

*“[...] and if I have an existing contract, this contract exists between two contractual partners [...] and then I can't generally breach the contract”* (farmer 6, DBV).

For several dairy farmers the financial situation did not allow the participation in the milk strike. Because of bank loans, they believed that they could not strike; they needed the money from the milk delivery.

*“They simply could not afford it out of financial reasons [...]”* (association expert 1).

In addition to the economic reasons, ethical reasons played a role in the decision to not participate in the milk strike, mainly the reluctance to destroy food.

*“Well, the pouring of milk that is a peculiar difficulty for many”* (association expert 1).

*“[...] if one is doing the work, and then one is opening the milk-tap and has to watch. That simply hurts in the heart. There goes the daily work. One has to emotionally bear this. And second, financially one has to also bear it. That are several 100 € for a larger dairy farm, every day”* (farmer 9, DBV).

Another group of non-participating farmers were convinced that the milk strike would not be successful, hence from their point of view a participation made no sense.

*“[...] and if one says, this cannot not work, from my perspective, then one has to distance oneself”* (farmer 5, DBV).

## **Discussion**

Characteristic of the convinced group was the DBV exit, which was typically linked with joining the BDM and a participation in the milk delivery strike. Some members of the convinced group saw their exit as implicit voice to make the DBV aware of their dissatisfaction regarding the lack of cooperation with the BDM. Overall, voice in form of feedback was absent or mainly destructive. Even claimed feedback by DBV officials from resigning members concerning their exit reasons was ignored or was not answered in a constructive way. DBV attempts to win back former members often failed or provoked outrage. Thus, destructive voice from the convinced group dominated the feedback to the DBV. The level of loyalty from the convinced group towards the DBV was low, due to the expectation that the DBV would not support the BDM and its requests.

The perceived options for farmers of the pressured group included pressured exit and silent withdrawal from exit. The voice function referring to these two groups was often missing, and their loyalty to the DBV was not shown. They hesitated to commit themselves to the position of the DBV toward the milk quota and milk strike publicly. The motives of pressured farmers to reduce feedback can be attributed to social concerns, such as preserving reputation, justification in the local community, relationship maintenance with BDM farmers, and perceived peer pressure.

The passive loyalty and missing voice are closely related. Passive loyalty reinforced the lack of voice and a decreasing willingness of voice led to more passivity. The reasons lay in a fear of becoming personally involved in the conflict, the pressure, and the public opinion against the DBV. Furthermore, within farm families the interaction between emotionality and rationality is important to understand the situation. During the conflict the family decision-making was subject of intense discussions, especially concerning the standing within the community. Often farmers had to weigh their own standpoint against harmony within the family, with the older generation, and among business partners. This balancing act was reflected in actions of pressured farmers to silently withdraw from the DBV exit, decrease public voice, or participate temporarily in the milk strike.

Several results of prior studies were affirmed by the results. Feindt's (2010) description of farmers' behavior in crisis situations (transfer of responsibility, blaming) was also identified in the convinced group's conflict behavior. The farmers held policy makers and DBV officials accountable for their uncertain future prospects. Coser (1972) mentioned higher participation rates in small group actions, which could be an explanation for the high engagement of BDM members

during the milk conflict. Also, group affiliation and trust were identified as reasons for the high involvement of BDM members.

Grima and Glayman (2012) described increasing likelihood of exit based on a decline in income, as well as the existence of alternatives. Interviewed farmers mentioned as most important exit reasons the existence of the BDM, as well as the disappointment with the milk price and, hence, the negative income development. Kolarska and Howard (1980) emphasized the relationship between the likelihood of exit and the belief in performance improvement. Parallels can be seen in the quantity and quality of voice of the convinced group. They started with constructive feedback and clear demands, but with the insight that the DBV would not fulfill their demands, farmers of the convinced group changed to destructive feedback or exited.

## **Conclusions**

The study was based on Hirschman's (1970) EVL model. The model is transferred to the agricultural sector, and applied to associations and the decision-making of their members. With respect to the exit decision of dairy farmers to resign their DBV membership, the exit category was modified. The differentiated exit category consists of convinced exit, and pressured exit, as well as the added element of silent withdrawal from exit. The voice category was also differentiated into the subgroups of voluntary voice, claimed voice, and missing voice. Further research can build on the explicated subcategories of exit and voice to frame research, develop measurement models, and analyze results. Moreover, the developed differentiation is a suitable starting point to compare the exit decision among different groups, including consumers, association members, and other groups in order to identify similarities and differences.

Associations can apply the following aspects of this conflict. Communication is essential for achieving active loyalty and motivating members to improve the organization through active voice. A possible action can be a change from a top-down communication approach to a more base-oriented approach. Particularly in the agricultural sector with its characteristic family businesses and the coexistence of emotionality and rationality, but also in many other contexts, this would include not to underestimate the importance of an emotional appeal. Based on the findings, addressing fear and other emotions could be improved by offering more options for members to exchange their opinions and perspectives in the early phases of policy changes. An opportunity for exchange can be provided by more attention to existing online communication platforms for member discussion. In that case, one or more association officials must monitor the discussion closely. The goal of this approach is a shift from passive members to more actively involved members, which can have a positive effect on loyalty levels. Another effect for associations is the opportunity of identifying potential conflicts early, in the initiation phase, where a factual discussion is still possible and interventions to decrease destructive voice and exit are more likely to succeed.

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