Great Expectations:
Perceptions and Policy Implications of the Social License Within
Saskatchewan’s Agricultural Sector

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ABSTRACT

The ‘social license to operate’ (SLO) is a concept originating in the mining industry which describes a project’s ability to earn and maintain trust or approval of public stakeholders. A recent controversy surrounding the decision of Earls Restaurants to switch from Canadian suppliers of beef to an American provider has introduced SLO into the agricultural sector. In 2016-2017, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture explored a social license framework, representing the SLO’s transition from the private to public sector. This thesis investigates how the SLO has redefined itself to meet the expectations of increasingly mobilized consumers, and its potential effectiveness as a policy instrument.

The findings of a case study analysis and expert interviews reveal that the most recent iteration of the Ministry SLO framework is founded on the ‘knowledge-deficit’ approach to scientific communication, where the role of the public is restricted to passive recipient of information in the consultation process. The conclusion is that the reinforcement of this mindset is unlikely to be effective in fulfilling public needs around engagement on contentious agricultural topics. Policy-makers interested in the SLO approach must ensure that the process is adapted to address industry specific concerns in a manner that is truly responsive and accountable. This research has implications for how policy-makers engage stakeholders and communicate risks in a manner that maintains public trust and legitimacy.
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INTRODUCTION

What does it mean for an organization to be considered trustworthy and its activity legitimate? If the public views their activity as untrustworthy or illegitimate, are there methods to allow for recourse? Industry leaders are looking to answer these questions due to increased public scrutiny in an age defined by quick and borderless communication. There is growing recognition that mobilized stakeholders can disrupt corporate agendas and demand additional regulation, government interventions, or outright termination if their specific criteria are not met (Boutilier, 2014). Therefore, new frameworks have emerged with the intent to help corporations manage the expectation that they “go beyond compliance” (Gunningham et al, 2004, p. 308) to achieve their agendas without costly disruption.

Social license, or social license to operate (SLO), is one such framework. Multiple sources ascribe its origins to both the Canadian and global mining industry (Boutilier and Thomson, 2011; Joyce and Thomson, 2000; Hall et. Al, 2015). Academics view the concept as associated with corporate social responsibility (CSR), a field of study originating in the mid-twentieth century calling for business to take on accountabilities beyond maximizing profit to avoid censure and increase civic harmony in multilevel decisionmaking (Bice et al, 2017). The SLO has continued to spread to industries with intrusive impacts, such as wind farms (Hall et al, 2015), marine governance (Cullen-Knox et al, 2017), forestry (Gunningham et. Al, 2004), and agriculture (Martin and Shepheard, 2011). This surge in popularity is also reflected in academic study; in 2016 alone, Gehman et al (2017) recorded over 2,000 publications focused on researching the usages of SLO framework.

A gap in the literature exists around the SLO as a policy tool, as existing literature focuses on the outcomes felt by private corporations and community stakeholders or activists. A
few foundational articles have discussed the SLO’s impact on public policy. Cullen-Knox et. Al (2017) studied relationships between policy-makers and non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) on decision making in Australia’s marine governance sector. Gehman et. Al (2017) studied the implications of using the SLO as a shorthand for public legitimacy. A case study by Jegen and Philion (2017) on public controversy over smart meter implementation in Quebec argued that current SLO advocates do not “address how power and institutions condition social acceptance.” (p.72). As government’s regulatory role has a significant impact regardless of the specific sector, the decision to adopt the SLO framework requires a clear understanding of how exactly the concept will align with the public’s view of legitimate communication and policy-making.

In Saskatchewan, the Ministry of Agriculture introduced a Social License Framework intended to complement industry efforts to promote information around agricultural practices and programs. Before communicating the science behind agricultural methods, this SLO framework chose to connect common beliefs to decrease the distance between rural and urban based customers (Ministry of Agriculture, 2016). The Ministry hoped to align their framework with other assurance systems across the agriculture industry to ensure that best management practices result from research and development. Agriculture in the Classroom, Farm and Food Care, and the Canadian Centre for Food Integrity, are organizations that both benefit from and contribute to this policy framework.

The research question that this thesis will address is: how effective of a policy tool is the agricultural SLO framework in addressing public concerns involving public legitimacy? Will a proactive communications strategy in the context of SLO help bridge the divide between the public and the decision-makers in a way that builds trust and legitimacy? Or is SLO a
communications tool that cannot be transferred and shared between public and private sector stakeholders? If the agricultural SLO is viewed throughout the value chain as helpful in facilitating positive engagement and public approval, then defining government’s role in this framework is a condition for measuring success. If the alternative is found, then a review of policy approaches to public engagement is necessary for trust-building exercises.

The argument this thesis will make is that the agricultural SLO framework is unlikely to be an effective policy tool as it has evolved beyond its original concept of two-way engagement into an arena of informational exchanges outside easily determined policy communications metrics. The lack of clear consensus around the SLO definition and its objectives creates problems in communicating consensus and legitimacy, as the general public and other stakeholders seldom share a common policy image despite undergoing the public engagement process. Current implementation relies on awareness strategies that mirror the knowledge deficit model of scientific engagement. Focusing more on sharing information shifts the discussion towards policy arenas where the public does not see their voice reflected in policy agenda-setting, likely furthering a loss of trust in policy-makers and agricultural experts. This limited nature of engagement will not bode well for consensus building in the policy process over contentious outcomes. Demands for policy intervention may increase until regulatory intervention is necessary. Earning the trust and legitimacy of civic leaders and the public at large around issues as important as food production will require a solution that comes from within and is integrated throughout the policy cycle.

Eisler (2014) argues that the “social license is at the intersection of politics and public policy.” (policyoptions.ca; pp. 10). If this is true, understanding what and how the social license communicates to the public will contribute to improving how policy-makers should utilize it
when approaching contentious policy decisions. Policy-makers looking to build consensus over issues with political, social, and environmental consequences need strong communication and delivery mechanisms to respond to opposition without significant disruption and loss of legitimacy. Achieving policy dialogue that is transparent and legitimate is a difficult but necessary goal for successful governance.

Thesis Structure

This thesis consists of five chapters total. The first chapter provides an overview of the entry of the SLO into the agricultural sector problem space and through the real-life example of the Earls Restaurant beef sourcing decision. The second chapter delves into the foundational aspects of the SLO, beginning with its roots in the concept of corporate social responsibility and the intersections with theoretical concepts in public policy. The third chapter describes the methodology of this thesis, which used open ended interview to explore the emergence of the concept within Saskatchewan’s agricultural sector. The fourth chapter focuses on findings from these interviews and how they concur or differ from the existing literature on the SLO and the policy process. The fifth and final chapter presents the conclusions of the research and recommendations for Saskatchewan policy-makers considering the process of building trust within the agricultural and agri-food sector.
CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND/INTRODUCTION TO THE AGRICULTURAL SLO AS A POLICY PROBLEM IN SASKATCHEWAN

This chapter investigates why and how the SLO entered the agricultural sector. It makes the argument that agricultural stakeholders looked to the mining sector through a process of policy learning to achieve positive engagement and legitimacy around complex socioeconomic and environmental issues commonly known as ‘wicked problems’ (Reinecke, J., & Ansari, S. (2015). This chapter offers an analysis of Earls Restaurants’ SLO-related controversy to set the SLO framework in a real-world setting. Using the findings of the case study the chapter investigates the impact of various media on the introduction of the SLO into this specific industry discourse. It makes the argument that the version of the SLO that emerged from this media-located debate was shaped by the knowledge deficit model of scientific communication. Finally, the implications of this model for the SLO framework and the overall agricultural sector will be discussed.

The agricultural sector, due to the unique values that drive consumer action, was viewed as an industry uniquely suited to looking favourable on the adoption of SLO (Charlebois, 2016). In 2016, Saskatchewan’s agricultural sector exported over $14 billion in agri-food products (Ministry of Agriculture, 2017). However, recent scientific and technological developments have begun to disrupt traditional approaches to agriculture governance. The local sector is heavily fragmented, as least partly because it is entwined with a range of large and extended supply chains that face a host of issues, such as genetically modified organisms (GMOs, pesticide use, industry consolidation, and climate change, most that also have widespread impact beyond agriculture (Martin and Shepheard, 2011). Research by the Canadian Centre for Food Integrity (2017) reveals that a significant number of Canadian consumers have lost faith in the safety of
their food, and do not look to government as a reliable source of information. This alleged decrease in public trust around the agricultural sector have significant economic and policy consequences for industry and policy-makers.

One example of invoking social license in the Canadian agri-food sector involved Earls Restaurants. In 2016, Earls, a popular restaurant chain in Western Canada, decided to switch to American beef suppliers, in response to consumer demands for ethically-sourced meat, resulted in significant outcry from Canadian ranchers and a section of the public over a failure to understand current regulations around antibiotic use in livestock (Globe and Mail, 2016). Despite eventually reversing their decision and committing to a membership on the Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef, Earls found itself on the CBC’s 2016 list of “Biggest Business Blunders” (Buckner, 2016). This case demonstrates how the SLO, as a vehicle for public expression of opinion, can impact industry competition and reputation management, and potentially result in a loss of public support or legitimacy.

2.2 Earls Restaurant Case Study

In Canada, the livestock sector is subject to regulations around hormone and anti-biotic use as determined by Health Canada. Currently, hormone use in livestock is permissible; as for antibiotic use, testing before slaughter ensures that levels of antibiotics are not present in meat intended for human consumption (Government of Canada, 2016; Mills 2002). Recent public concern over proper use of hormones and antibiotics have emerged in response to legislation in the European Union where concerns were intertwined with health scandals around adulterated meat and inhumane treatment of cattle (Von Massow, 2016). In response to this, third party organizations have developed certification programs to provide assurance to customers that the
meat they are consuming is not only in compliance with safety standards, but also goes beyond these practices to align with values that consumers possess regarding desirable food production (Tait, 2016).

After surveying shareholders in 2016, employees, and some segments of their customers, Earls made the decision to focus on prioritizing the use of humane-certified beef in their restaurants (Business News Network, 2016). They announced that they would work with a third-party corporation called Humane Farm Animal Care based out of the United States (Arnauson, 2016), as they were unable to find a single Canadian supplier that could meet their supply quota within the allotted timeframe (Underwood, 2016). This decision, as described by Earls CEO Mo Jessa, was intended to meet the changing values of conscious consumers that wanted to know their products were not just safe to eat, but free from practices that went against other core values (Bell, 2016; Business News Network, 2016). For some stakeholders, knowing that the beef products were sustainability and ethically produced ranked higher in consideration than the country of origin (Von Massow, 2016).

The response to this decision was swift. The media featured interviews with Canadian ranchers and other livestock producers concerned over the optics of this decision, particularly around the potential for Canadian consumers to be misled around how Canadian beef is regulated and how safety standards are formed (Calgary Eyeopener, 2016). These producers noted that all third-party humane certifications are not universal, and many may not result in a better choice for consumers (Tait, 2016). Other critics declared that the decision was not done to maintain trust with consumers, but rather represented a sophisticated marketing campaign to draw new consumers to the restaurants (Biber, 2016). Many producer associations called for boycotts of the restaurant chain; there are rough estimates that Earls profits declined 30 per cent in targeted
regions within the western Canadian provinces (Bakx, 2016). Notably, however, certain social media sites urged Earls to remain firm on their decision; in comparison with Alberta and Saskatchewan consumers, where demand dropped, consumer sales in British Columbia and Toronto were sustained, which according to some commentators justified the policy (Arnauson, 2016).

Due to the persistence of the negative reactions in the media, Earls Restaurants chose to change how it implemented its policy. They stated that they would partner with multiple Canadian suppliers with different humane certifications to meet their allocation needs (Underwood, 2016). Earls also made a commitment to join the Canadian Roundtable on Sustainable Beef, alongside other food producers, retail chains, and restaurants, pledging to create common standards for safe and sustainable beef production in Canada (Business News Network, 2016; Underwood, 2016). Bob Low, the chair of the Alberta Beef Producers associated, was quoted as stating that the industry must “work to earn its’ social license to operate by proving to consumers their animals are well cared for… rather than insisting that they already produce humane beef” (Business News Network, 2016: pp.10).

1.2 Policy Problem

To avoid future negative outcomes, Canadian agri-food industry stakeholders and policy-makers began to look at the SLO as a tool to manage legitimacy challenges. Throughout 2016, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture held nationwide “Journey to Public Trust” consultations over introducing a public trust component into a national food policy (Canadian Federation of Agriculture, 2016). This resulted in the creation of the Public Trust Steering Committee, which
adopted a hub model to include stakeholders across Canada under an umbrella framework to produce unified messaging and verification systems (Canadian Federation of Agriculture, 2016).

The SLO framework, as envisioned by the Saskatchewan Ministry of agriculture, represented the transition of the concept from the private to public sector. The Ministry defined the SLO as “society’s trust in, and acceptance of, modern food production.” (2016, pp.6). It was also described as a “roadmap” (pp.15) and “commitment to continuous improvement.” (pp. 13). The framework as described consisted of two components: “doing what’s right as an industry, then building awareness about what we do in agriculture and why” (Ministry of Agriculture, 2016; pp. 4). While the website set out the framework’s objectives, the exact details of the key themes and specific consumer outreach activities were not made available to the public.

As of 2018, the framework was housed within the Ministry of Agriculture’s Public Trust Division, found within the Regional Services Branch. The Public Trust Division was also identified as responsible for the implementation of a public trust mandate outlined by the Canadian Agricultural Partnership (CAP), a bilateral five-year funding program between the Canadian federal government and the Saskatchewan provincial government. Funding for programs that advance the public acceptance of agriculture were deemed a priority in the bilateral negotiations. As has been established by the federal-provincial negotiations, provinces do have the ability to establish their own areas of strategic focus, which is how Saskatchewan’s agreement has specific mentions of the social licenses and public trust where other provinces chose to address other agricultural priorities. In 2023, the CAP was replaced with the new five-year bilateral agreement known as the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership (SCAP). This agreement renews the commitment to “telling the story of agriculture”, “renewing trust” via an Agricultural Awareness Initiative funding grant.
These initiatives represent a significant governance shift towards proactively responding to emerging concerns in the agricultural sector. Traditional agricultural policy has been defined by an active government presence in supporting key stakeholders in traditional areas of production or insurance (Skogstad, 2008), but industry stakeholders are looking to use the SLO to reduce the need for government to intervene with regulations motivated by public concern (Williams, 2011). With the Agricultural Awareness Initiative, it can be argued that the approach of Saskatchewan’s Ministry of Agriculture has also become increasingly proactive in areas of support that have previously not seen high levels of government or policy communication.

The above case study involving Earls Restaurants is significant as it encapsulates the moment the specific terminology linked to the SLO concept was introduced to the agricultural supply chain. In the face of competing social demands, Earls made a business decision that resulted in negative feedback from a separate set of stakeholders and responded accordingly. However, it also questions how framing an issue with an SLO lens versus another word or concept related to public engagement can legitimately communicate consensus across a large and geographically distributed supply chain. This also specifically occurred in the realm of media discourse, unlike other public industry conflicts which can be identified in a localized area. The knowledge deficit model of communication provides a potential lens to explain the underlying approach to communications during this controversy. The perspective of the interview participants will provide further analysis and reaction to how the Earls case has impacted the sector’s communication strategies to achieve public acceptability of current agricultural practices.
CHAPTER TWO: SOCIAL LICENSE IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Social license has evolved from the earlier and bigger concept of corporate social responsibility that asserts firms have responsibilities to broader society, and not just to customers and shareholders. However, to fully grasp how this SLO concept has entered into the discourse in multiple industries and sectors, this chapter will provide a review of literature of past related concepts and explore the evolution of government-industry practices around forms of public engagement.

2.1 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Corporate social responsibility (CSR), as it emerged throughout the twentieth century, centered around identifying the changing roles and expectations placed on corporations as social actors (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Syn (2014) builds upon definitions used by Carroll (2008) and Werther and Chandler (2011) to describe CSR activities as voluntary practices that do not have making or increasing profits as the primary objective. CSR initiatives could potentially include activities from single philanthropic donations in the community to internal human resources practices (Morrison, 2014). The common thread between all these definitions is that CSR initiatives must be voluntary, strategic, and ultimately mitigate risk related to the future sustainability of the initiative or organization (Carroll, 2008). This means that any CSR activity “remains largely limited to the narrow logic of the business case of self-defined responsible practice.” (Bice et al, 2017: p. 48).

As a result, there is significant disagreement about the outcomes and value of CSR practices. Noted economist Milton Friedman (1970) stated that private organizations should not engage in this discourse as it increases the risk that the primary role of corporations—creation of
profits—will suffer as a result. A second common critique is focused on the intention behind the decision to become more socially responsible. Coombs and Holliday (2010) have studied the presence of the ‘halo effect’, where corporations build a reputation of responsibility as a shield against loss from future mistakes. Meanwhile, some assert corporations only use CSR practices to the extent that it provides them with an advantage against competing businesses and services, with the community as a negligible concern (Salazar and Husted, 2008; Vlachos, et al, 2009).

It is important for policy-makers to be aware of current trends and practices relating to CSR, as the rationale for their adoption is often linked to the actions and principles of the public sector (Moon and Vogel, 2008). An oft stated rationale for why corporations would voluntarily act in a socially responsible manner is that they are filling a gap in areas where policy-makers would otherwise be expected to act but fail to do so either because of intentional or unintentional inaction, inefficiencies, or other obstacles (Reinecke and Ansari, 2015). Studies have suggested that this has many potential benefits for citizens when governments intervene (Morrison, 2014; Moon and Vogel, 2008). However, this is not without potential pitfalls, as these arrangements do not answer “the question of where accountability lies if CSR is inspired or legitimated by government” (Moon and Vogel, 2008: p.320)

Specifically, regarding agriculture and food industries, the perceptions of CSR and its activities are shaped by powerful and unique factors. Hartmann (2011) argues that the interrelation of environmental health and individual physical health creates a unique tension that cannot be found within other sectors. She observes that, as a result, expectations around CSR activities cannot be equally implemented, since there is a significant distance between an individual’s health and their environment. Bancerz (2016) observes the key role of food literacy
among the public, especially when non-traditional food organizations run literacy programs that may seem at odds with the business practice of selling their products.

2.2 Social License to Operate (SLO)

The SLO concept developed in the context of rising public opposition to extractive and disruptive projects, despite the presence of legal and regulatory permitting processes and other (Boutilier and Thomson, 2011). The focus on the concept was linked to mitigating this social risk, thereby entrenching the suggestion that “communities have as much authority as government in granting permissions or ‘licenses’” (Boutilier 2014, p. 263). Corporations that voluntarily decide to spend time, effort, and financial resources on identifying community values and expectations will build “reputational capital” (Joyce and Thomson, 2000) or a “surplus of legitimacy” (Gehman et al 2017) that will improve the likelihood of successful implementation or recovery from negative outcomes. The loss of social license is a message to corporations that their actions are not in alignment with the goal of having their “social obligations… synonymous with their legal obligations” (Gunningham 2004, p. 308). The fact that this process of negotiation and engagement happens outside the corporation reflects a “more stakeholder centered extension to current CSR practices” (Hall and Jeannart, 2015: p. 214).

A key theme within the current literature is the fact that the SLO framework has largely been developed in an era of rapid changes in communication (Prno and Slocombe, 2013; Yates and Horvath, 2013). New communication tools and technologies eliminate barriers of time and distance, widening the potential number of affected communities and relevant stakeholders (Wilburn and Wilburn, 2011). Unlike CSR activities, the role of dialogue is viewed as a better
strategic outcome and the general process of relationship building for better outcomes (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017). Lacey and Lamont (2014) specifically point to this as evidence that the framework essentially operates as an “informal social contract” (p. 30), and therefore deepens the perspective of the SLO framework as an exchange of the values underpinning legitimacy.

As with the literature surrounding CSR theories and practices, the SLO framework has been on the receiving end of scholarly critique. A common theme found in these arguments is that the framework invites the public to disrupt or stop a process that has gone through regulatory processes meant to provide transparency and rigour to the decision-making process (Boutilier, 2014; Crowley, 2014). Owens and Kemp (2013) also argue that the concept is “more about reducing overt opposition to industry than it is about engagement for long-term development.” (p.6). Bursey (2015) points to the concept’s usage of the word ‘license’ as a potential issue, as each community and stakeholder has different conceptualizations of what approval and consent mean, which increases the potential for confusion. Newman (2014) critiques the SLO framework as continuously undergoing “a sort of conceptual drift – from practical useful business concept to imposition of new requirements through extra-legal means” (p.4). Thus, the qualities of the SLO framework that allow for wide usage may also result in confusing, uncertain outcomes for different stakeholders and the overall activities of the sector.

In the emerging literature around the SLO framework and agriculture, the focus has been on how the use of physical resources largely determines society’s perception of the sector. Martin and Shepherd (2011) define the SLO as that “latitude that society allows its citizens to exploit resources for their private purposes.” (p.4). Its role as an engagement framework is again found in Brohmer (2011), who asserts the essence of social license is “a process of communication between an institution and its social environment” (p. 114). Whether the SLO
framework is sufficient for an industry caught between “a democratic society’s right to decide how to proceed, producers’ freedom to operate, and consumers’ right and freedom to know” (Ludlow et al 2014, p. 11).

Critics view this aspect of the SLO as problematic since it “misaligns expectations and focuses the debate on a vague concept of governance… rather than focusing on improving performance where it matters” (Bursey 2015, p. 9). Also unclear is who ultimately bestows the SLO, and if the values are universal to all agri-food stakeholders (Charlebois, 2016). The SLO is further criticized for weakening existing legal conduits (Newman, 2014) and for allowing unfocused public disapproval to challenge evidence-based decision-making (Crowley, 2014).

To summarize and contextualize the literature review on the social license concept thus far, the findings have been summarized in the table below. These variables, alongside the case study, will help to analyze the responses from the participant interviews.

Table 2.1: SLO Variables in Mining vs. Agriculture: Literature Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SLO Variable</th>
<th>Agricultural SLO</th>
<th>Mining/Resource SLO</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lead Expert/Identified</td>
<td>Government/regulatory bodies</td>
<td>Company leaders, community interest representatives (e.g. Indigenous communities)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration/Time</td>
<td>Continuous (agriculture products and processes)</td>
<td>Restricted to project duration (construction, closure to cleanup)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Location</td>
<td>Far-ranging: from production site through potential market consumption</td>
<td>Local community/region where extractive project is targeted and developed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costs of Disruption</td>
<td>Economic, environmental, social, health</td>
<td>Primary economic, environmental, social</td>
</tr>
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2.3 **Wicked Problems**

As previously discussed, the SLO framework has emerged from a debate over whether corporations should undertake socially responsible action beyond minimum standards set by regulation to maintain legitimacy. While there is no consensus on the definition or utility of the SLO concept, expectations have clearly shifted around the corporation’s role as a social actor. This is due in part to the changing nature of the problems industry faces today.

Ritter and Webber (1973) are the scholars credited with developing criteria to determine the nature of ‘wicked problems.’ These are problems that do not possess a static characterization, are unique due to size, invite multiple stakeholders to the debate, and do not have a singular resolution (Head, 2008; Rittel and Webber, 1973; Reinecke and Ansari, 2016). Wicked problems are also identified by the notion that there are “no formulas or objective criteria to judge a solution right or wrong” (Reinecke and Ansari, 2016: p. 302). Approaches to wicked problems often involve stakeholder negotiation, particularly involving “trade-offs between competing values” (Durant and Legge, 2006; p.310). Head (2008) notes that the concept of wicked problems is appealing in public policy because it provides a rationale behind why the solutions of decision-makers are often revealed to have unintended consequences or were deemed to have no measurable impact whatsoever.
Understanding the interrelated nature of these wicked problems, and how they tend to encompass multiple sectors, reveals how these sectors would gravitate towards each other’s experiences to develop strategies and actions to mitigate negative outcomes. This process, while occurring between private organizations in multiple sectors, is also being reflected by the public sector, as they become aware of different actions to take as a result. Hall (1993) connects this process to “policymaking as social learning” (p.275).

The Ministry of Agriculture’s SLO framework acknowledges the interrelatedness of the issues facing the sector. This is evidenced by the identification of four themes – animal health, environment, human health, and society—where significant attention is paid to the overlap between the subject areas (Ministry of Agriculture, 2016). Additionally, the framework recognizes the need to address all issues in a comprehensive fashion, involving all relevant stakeholders, through services including research funding and extension services.

### 2.4 Knowledge Deficit Model of Scientific Communication

As Earls case study demonstrates, communication around agricultural practices and health standards is complex and fraught with opportunities for misunderstanding. Scientific communication requires significant time and effort to ensure success, as it needs to be understood by a wide range of individuals. Therefore, several models of communication have emerged. One of the most common is the knowledge deficit model, which posits that the primary reason the public struggles to understand and trust scientific evidence is a lack of proper education (Besley and Nesbit, 2013; Simis et. al, 2016). The inability to properly educate individuals around the scientific process fosters ignorance, which begats negative attitudes
towards scientists and their institutions. Thus, the only path forward is to reverse this trend by closing the information gap (Ahteensuu, 2011).

From a policy making perspective, Simis et al. (2016) makes the argument that the allure of the deficit model approach lies in its attempt to identify a single point of failure:

“With its narrow focus on public knowledge levels, the deficit model approach has the benefit of identifying a specific source for the lagging public support for science. It pinpoints public ignorance as the problem and proposes a single and straightforward solution, that is, eliminate ignorance through education. This approach also has the added benefit of working within the confines of established infrastructure, the education system.” (p.409)

There are several examples of language used in the public description of the Ministry of Agriculture’s SLO framework that coincide with the knowledge deficit model of communication. Key phrases such as “building awareness” (pp.4) and “they often don’t have the full story” (pp.3) point to a belief that the problems facing the industry are largely due to ignorance or misleading information. Additionally, the framework emphasizes the importance of funding educational outreach to “present information” (pp. 7) to those who may not have encountered or have access to ongoing agricultural discourse. The terminology used on the Ministry’s website strongly suggests that their perspective and process of adopting this emerging term centers on knowledge transfer and other information-based approaches to engagement.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Structured interviews with stakeholders from industry, government and advocacy groups were used to investigate perceptions of social license and its role in decision-making in the agricultural sector. This research project received ethics approval from the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board in May 2017. The interview instrument and additional details are found in Appendix A. Interviews were conducted between May and August 2017 with six participants who were intimately concerned with the development of a framework for the utilization of the SLO. The identification of interview subjects was based on their attendance at previous social license related conferences held in Saskatchewan, where potential participants expressed an interest in being involved in further research on the topic. These participants also put the researcher in contact with individuals who were interested in the topic or were colleagues responsible for the agriculture file, but unable to be present at the specific events. These included employees of the federal and provincial governments, agricultural industry associations (including livestock and grains producers), educators, and also a few independent farmers or producers. Participants from Earls Restaurants and other local food retailers chose not to participate, which limits that part of the study to the public record.

Qualitative interview questions were conducted via telephone. All six participants were provided with letters of consent in advance of their scheduled interview date. Within five days of the interviews, participants were provided with full transcripts of their interview sessions for revisions and the full ability to remove or add their opinions as needed. Participants then signed an additional form confirming their consent for their remarks to be published anonymously in the form of this thesis. All consent forms, interview transcripts, and recordings are stored in accordance with ethics procedures and data storage procedures.
Interview data was coded using NVIVO software, a qualitative research tool that identifies themes that encapsulate respondents’ attitudes towards components of the framework that impact their work. The themes and patterns that emerged provided a narrative of how the SLO is being implemented in the agri-food policy space and helped to analyze if it was successful in addressing the concerns of agri-food stakeholders and consumers. In the analysis that follows, each specific respondent is coded as P-0i, with a date for their interview.
CHAPTER FOUR: INTERVIEW FINDINGS ON THE SLO IN AGRICULTURE

This chapter provides the results of the qualitative interviews conducted with six Saskatchewan based agricultural stakeholders, subsequently transcribed and analyzed with NVIVO coding software. All participants were asked to provide their thoughts on the definition of the SLO, its origins and purpose, and what made the concept unique from previous approaches to responsible engagement. Participants were also asked for their opinions on the similarities and differences between the mining sector’s version of the SLO and the agricultural version, with additional discussion on the specifics of the Earls case study. Finally, all participants gave perspectives on the role of media, trust, and knowledge in the implementation of SLO engagement and whether it would ultimately be an impactful policy tool for government to utilize.

4.1 Defining Social License to Operate

The interviews began with questions set up to define the SLO and other examples of corporate social responsibility. Participants were asked to provide the key factors and variables that shaped their perspective and discussion was open-ended so the participants could provide examples from both the agricultural sector and beyond.

When asked to provide their initial views on the meaning of the social license to operate, all participants made references to trust and communication. The SLO framework was viewed as an exchange between stakeholders, focused on understanding the unique relationship between food and society overall. Key phrases that summarized this trend were “making an effort to connect” (P-02: June 2017) and “codifying or creating a trusting relationship.” (P-03: June 2017). Participants returned to the underlying idea of the SLO as exchange of information, values, and opinions, even as the details of their interpretations diverged.
A definition shared by two of the participants was that the SLO framework defines at the margin what action(s) the public views to be socially acceptable. They viewed the SLO as an instrument to earn public trust, not as a word synonymous with public trust. The loss of a SLO was viewed as farmers and industry straying beyond the boundaries of what the public could accept as rightful action, which subsequently leads to a loss of freedom or opportunity to make independent choices around their operations. These definitions fall in alignment with the Ministry of Agriculture’s (2016) definition, which calls for industry to commit to “doing the right thing” (2016, pp.4).

The definitions offered by other participants, after input and analysis in NVIVO were completed, were mixed or critical of the above definitions. One participant did not define the SLO as defining parameters of acceptable action, but rather as a process where actors such as government or industry must be proactive in “understanding what the implications are for their decisions and make a reasonable effort to mitigate some of the worries and troubles individuals might have with the issue at hand.” (P-06, June 2017). This process was seen to be a broad process of engagement currently existing as an informal process, but eventually could be formalized in other institutions, such as duty to consult, or free, prior, informed consent (FPIC). They also viewed ‘social license’ as the result of working towards public trust. One respondent suggested they are “trying to back away from the term” (P-02, June 2017) to describe the overall process of defining social responsibility.

The remaining participants held strongly critical definitions of the SLO framework. They viewed the concept as a public relations campaign or a framework that uses public trust to stabilize the industry in the wake of recent public controversies, rather than a proactive relationship or consensus building activity. For one participant, the SLO framework is a “way of
fending off mistrust” (P-03: June 2017). Another participant described the framework as working towards “tacit permission to operate as they have always done” (P-05: June 2017). These participants viewed the emergence of the SLO as less representative of a call for responsible change initiated by a true call for dialogue, but rather an industry-led framework to shift public perception towards alignment with existing industry beliefs and values in reaction to a perceived conflict. In contrast to other participants’ more positive view of SLO as a proactive framework to avoid conflict, these respondents viewed the SLO as something that would pacify the public’s need for engagement or demands for change.

4.2 Purpose of the SLO Framework

In this section, the answers of the participants were intended to provide insight into the potential objectives of an agricultural SLO. Participants were asked about how the agricultural industry has engaged with the public and the challenges that arise from those interactions that the SLO could potentially address.

In a similar fashion to the first question, participants were divided on what objective the SLO framework is intended to fulfill. Participants were at odds over whether the concept was intended to improve the relationship between the sector and consumers, or if the SLO framework is focused on preserving the status quo operations of the sector. These perspectives fell along the divisions of the first section, where those participants who were positive or neutral about the framework promoted its potential to improve the sector, whereas those skeptical were not likely to view the concept as having a positive role and were more likely to focus on the potential negative outcomes of the concept.
For those participants that viewed the SLO framework as a tool to improve the relationship between industry and consumers, the purpose was largely defined by the industry’s recognition of emerging trends and changes impacting food production and consumption. Common factors that were cited included: emerging new demands on farmers and other stakeholders such as changes in communication methods, technology advancements, complexity of meeting the needs of global consumers, and ultimately the renewed emphasis on food security as a value important to the public. Therefore, for farmers or small producers that were once relatively left alone to represent their work, the purpose of the SLO framework was viewed as positive because it signaled awareness of changes needed to make the sector more responsive and agile. It also proactively provided a tool that could be used to unite the sector’s efforts in responding to consumers in a more technologically advanced and nuanced manner.

If the participants viewed the concept to be a tool to serve the purpose of the agribusiness or industry stakeholders, it was because the SLO framework was only invoked as a direct response to public opposition, and not through a standard engagement process. This created a perception that the concept was intended to serve as a fix and not a structural change. It prioritized communication around risks and challenges which were muted in relatively quieter times. While the concerns of the consumer were acknowledged and responded to, the implicit goal was to prevent further disruption, redefine contentious terms, and return the discourse to support the status quo. This group of participants largely viewed the purpose of the SLO framework as a tool to amplify scientific expertise and arguments against the changing attitudes and values of consumers, reframing opposition to appear uninformed about scientific facts or as unnecessarily disruptive towards innovative development and hence clashing with community values.
These ideas were expanded further in the case involving Earls Restaurant, which introduced the concept’s language and defined the purpose in the wake of the public controversy around humane beef certification. That is covered in the following sections.

4.3 The Uniqueness of the SLO

In this part of the interview, now that the baseline definition and intended objectives of the SLO had been discussed, participants were invited to share their opinions on why (or why not) the SLO was a new and emerging concept in either the areas of corporate social responsibility or as a tool for agricultural public engagement.

Participants were asked to identify what they saw as the unique features of the SLO framework, either in isolation or in comparison to other concepts involving socially-responsible public engagement. A common theme was that the SLO framework represented a change in approach to overall social responsibility. Participants whose responses were coded as more positive or open to SLO viewed it as representing a shift from corporation-led to community-led engagement, or joint ownership of engagement processes. For one participant, previous socially responsible action was limited by the organizational needs of industry stakeholders, but the SLO framework evolved the principle into “something much broader, something that perhaps becomes more of a process. I think social license is a bit deeper than CSR” (P-06, June 2017).

Another theme that emerged around the SLO framework’s unique features was that it introduced new standards and expectations around communication throughout the supply chain. New methods of communication, and the ability of these new methods to reach a global audience, resulted in changes to the public-facing aspects of food production and marketing. One participant cited examples of workshops or educational initiatives where invited individual
producers presented their practices, instead of traditional representatives from larger agricultural businesses, citing the fact that the public now had the tools to access and engage in areas of the supply chain that they valued and had previously felt disconnected from (P-05, June 2017). Regardless of whether the participants viewed the SLO framework as having a positive or a negative impact on the sector, they all concurred that the uniqueness of the concept was largely focused on widening the scope of the engagement efforts to unprecedented levels.

One participant asserted that the term social license was “defining a phenomenon, and the phenomenon itself is that the public is having a larger influence on government in the development of policy and regulation” (P-01, June 2017). Other participants reiterated the theme of newly vocalized minority groups gaining access to sector dialogue via new methods of communication. In turn, this created a shift in public expectations around the methods and roles of industry stakeholders in the engagement process. With industry expected to act in more socially responsive and responsible ways, since agriculture is viewed with high consideration by the public, it meant that their transgressions in the eyes of the public would result in a greater call for the intervention of policy-makers. As a result, experts in the field faced further challenges to explain value to both consumers and policy-makers in new ways, with a goal of regaining enough positive traction to have their activity viewed as legitimate and without the need for more intrusive oversight.
4.4 Declining Trust/Engagement as a Factor for Seeking Out SLO

This component of the interview process was meant to delve further into the rationale behind the SLO being adopted by other external stakeholders. Questions here were open ended with the intent to see if these participants agreed with the findings of previous academic literature that declining trust and low engagement were behind the increased drive to use the SLO and other corporate social responsibility concepts as solutions by government and industry alike.

All participants gave varying answers regarding the level of trust the agricultural sector currently enjoys. All participants stated that it was hard to ascertain whether the sector is enjoying a high level of trust, as they lack the ability to present significant quantitative or qualitative data to extend their case across the entire supply chain. Surveys about public acceptance of food production have been conducted by the Farm and Food Care and the Centre for Food Integrity, however these surveys only began collecting and analyzing this data in the past decade and currently cannot provide a long-term view on where and why attitudes to food production have changed in Saskatchewan, Canada, or globally. Due to this, many participants acknowledged that they were reliant upon their own vantage point within the sector when describing levels of trust and if the SLO was adopted by the sector in response to a need or vacuum of trust.

A majority of the participants were willing to state that trust levels fluctuated depending on the section of the supply chain, or the specific industry actor involved in the immediate food or agricultural issue. The reason given was that consumers have different levels of access to these stakeholders, and traditionally agricultural stakeholders have not been expected to explain their practices to this degree. Participants were more likely to say that individual farmers or
smaller operations enjoy higher levels of trust, as they were associated with accessibility and the traditional image of strong work ethic and values. Larger agricultural organizations were more likely to be viewed suspiciously or as untrustworthy as their size, corporate hierarchies, and lack of transparency around development do not easily support ongoing and widespread public engagement processes.

When discussing why the agricultural sector finds it difficult to engage with the public, the highly specialized and fragmented nature of food and agriculture was commonly cited. Participants noted that the global reach of food production and purchasing meant that many actors were not in direct contact with their audience, or that their product underwent significant alterations that they did not have control over before it reached the marketplace. As a result, each stakeholder has unique responsibilities and messaging, which can present a divided front to consumers who are looking for clear responses.

The second common barrier to engagement in the agricultural sector was the specialized knowledge surrounding the different types of production and requirements of each level of the supply chain. While participants acknowledged in later questions that the public desires a strong understanding of what products they consume, it is not easy to entice individuals to give up time to engage with the process. One participant noted the difficulty of industry stakeholders also finding the time and resources to effectively reach this increasingly diverse audience. Many industry stakeholders and smaller producers lack experience in communicating to a non-technical audience. One interview participant observed that it was difficult enough to convince producers of the importance of communicating to build trust, let alone finding ways to educate them on how to share their knowledge. Therefore, the quickness to adopt and implement the
language of the SLO has become a shortcut to address previous deficiencies in industry engagement and the perceived need for corporations to become socially responsible actors.

4.5 Shared SLO Challenges in Mining and Agriculture

Participants were then asked to provide their own perspectives on the origins of the SLO in the mining sector and how it transferred to the agricultural sector. Participants were invited to explore how engagement with this concept positioned the agricultural industry in relation to other industries facing similar challenges beyond mining. Open ended questions allowed participants to bring in their perspectives on industry engagement and the mechanisms by which they have experienced both industry and government engage with the public in a way that is viewed as trustworthy and legitimate.

The first shared legitimacy challenge identified by all participants was the increasing industrialization of resource use occurring in both mining and agriculture. While certain scientific and technological advancements have provided industry with solutions to reduce environmental impact and increase efficiencies, both industries remain significantly intrusive, resulting in greater calls for formal and informal oversight. Participants noted that mistakes or lack of transparency involving the usage of these types of resources are likely to face significant scrutiny and criticism; for instance, the failure of a pipeline or the spread of a bad herbicide requires significant time and money to fix, and often the damage is long-lasting. The site-specific nature of the SLO was also discussed by participants, as the impact of production on the land itself was often accompanied by visual evidence of environmental harm or community displacement making it harder to ignore a call to respond.
Inversely, participants also noted in their interview responses that the increased global impact of these two industries played a role in the need for both to increase their socially responsible engagement and thus they view the SLO aligning with their needs. While a mine or an agricultural field may be situated in one region, the products and byproducts are exported to and imported from various international destinations with different business regulatory and policy environments, public values, and public engagement expectations. Increasing the market size also increases the number of interactions and accompanying social and economic risks. Public engagement in this world becomes at best contentious and at worst disruptive or delegitimizing. Industry stakeholders in mining and agriculture are continuously looking to develop best practices.

Once again, the theme of communication, specifically around speed of conversations and increasing access to the industry discourse, emerged as a significant challenge to maintaining public legitimacy, which enhances the attractiveness of SLO and similar frameworks. Regardless of the specific audience the mining or agricultural stakeholder is looking to engage with, the ‘how’ of the engagement has changed from the earliest days of industrial mining or agricultural production. Even if the threat of project or industry disruption and cancellation was not present in these sectors, the need to “meet the public where they are” has become increasingly important to operations. Participants noted that they have observed the how of communicating around an issue is equally, or even more, important than the issue itself—resulting in the SLO not being invoked due to the nature of any single project or its impact but rather in how the corporation approaches and communicates its situation. Therefore, the industry stakeholder is not necessarily being scrutinized for any specific operational decision but for a perception that may be harder to quantify and analyze at vastly different stages of the projects or organization’s lifespan.
4.6 Unique SLO Challenges in Agriculture

In this section, the Earls case study as a defining example of the SLO was the primary question of participants. Building upon the previous discussion of the SLO in the mining sector, questions primarily focused on the communication and reception of the SLO specific to agricultural stakeholder needs. Participants were asked to comment not just on the impact of the Earls decision on the agribusiness industry but also about how the media coverage impacted the SLO introduction to the agricultural sector. Open ended questions allowed for the participants to provide further insight into how engagement mechanisms communicate trust and legitimacy for stakeholders.

The first challenge unique to the agricultural sector version of the SLO, as agreed upon by the majority of the interview participants, was the fact that the industry was positioned on a different moral level when it came to the necessity of public engagement. Agriculture is viewed as an industry that is completely foundational to the public’s lifestyle—no one community or individual can go without food. One participant noted that the demand for an SLO or other form of corporate social responsibility in the agricultural industry was to be expected and long overdue. Previously food enjoyed an “almost untouched” status, but now as farms become large-scale industrial operations and the traditional view of farms and food production has begun to fade, the public has begun to look for increased transparency and engagement to ensure that their confidence and trust in such a foundational sector can be maintained. Interview participants stated that from their perspective, mining and other extractive resource sectors do not have the same historical perception centered on moral values and traditional ties to the production process as farmers.
While participants noted the similarities in how public engagement practices mining and agriculture were linked in multiple ways to geography, they all acknowledged some aspect of how widely dispersed agriculture and agricultural products creates challenges for building industry-consumer consensus. Food especially was viewed as being uniquely subject to expectations on an individual level, due to consumption and health matters, rather than how mines were largely responding to a collective value assessment on what the best outcome would be. One participant noted that the debate of SLO and socially responsible agriculture was “…moved from ‘my backyard’ to … ‘my body’” (P-06, June 2017) where there is perception of higher risk for the individual and thus an increased chance that new and more expansive demands for engagement and socially responsible action will be placed on the food producer. This brings the agricultural SLO into a much more highly individualistic space than SLO for mining. The terms of acceptability and engagement for farming and food are thus much more difficult to navigate for both industry stakeholders and policy-makers responsible for health and agricultural oversight. Those interview participants that were skeptical of the SLO noted the unique location and relationship to food and its public interaction ultimately creates the difference between the mining and agricultural SLO. The same terms of engagement for the mining SLO could not be transferred to agriculture when the concept was invoked by agricultural stakeholders. As previously mentioned, the highly specialized and fragmented nature of what constitutes the ‘agricultural sector’ is another unique component of the agricultural SLO. The emergence of the SLO within the context of the Earls’ Restaurant case helped to define the concept in a time and place that did not involve all agricultural stakeholders in the spectrum. The media played a defining role in the SLO agricultural debut. For interview participants that are not also beef producers or in a related agricultural field, this led to skepticism that the SLO
The public perceptions of beef production and the related invocation of the SLO did not encompass the public concerns about grain production or even other valued added businesses, at least partly because media focused the SLO on restaurants, well past the farm gate, and only in one of many arenas where consumers interact with food products.

The first group of participants viewed the initial outcomes of the Earls incident as mostly positive, albeit a shallow win. It was viewed as creating the opportunity for industry to catch up with the discussion around changing public values and attitudes around beef production and to engage different aspects of the supply chain that had been removed from this debate. This was largely seen to help the industry ‘catch up’ with other sectors considered ahead in dealing with public engagement. For these participants supportive of the SLO framework, the Earls case highlighted areas in need of addressing and provided valuable insight into changes in the industry that had not made it to the mainstream previously. For one participant, this was an example of the industry demonstrating a willingness to recognize and respond to the conversation. The decision made by Earls to commit to using Canadian producers and joining the domestic Roundtable for Sustainable Beef was a tangible commitment to socially responsible behaviour and representative of a significant shift in the discourse.

Another group of participants felt the Earls case harmed the agricultural sector, with varying degrees of lasting impact. They saw this controversy largely as a reflexive response to potential change that will result in additional scrutiny and regulation, particularly if consumers wanted to enforce labelling rules that would meet a humane production certification. Instead of trying to get ahead in the discussion, this group saw the stance and tone as largely defensive. One participant saw this as the industry losing control of the discussion and a distraction from trying
to satisfy consumer demand. For these participants, while the consumer had been the first to express concerns, the positioning of the industry stakeholders, the media and the claims to inside expertise by a few individuals meant that the problem narrative was captured and distorted. Participants noted that similar controversies reappear as numerous food products currently enjoyed by Canadians come from outside the country and trigger concerns over humane or ethical growth practices.

Two participants noticed almost no significant impact of the Earls decision on their day-to-day operations, as their professional agricultural fields of expertise were not related to beef production or restaurant sales.

4.7 SLO’s Impact on Policy: Public Opinion vs. Evidence Based Decision Making

In this final interview section, participants were asked questions concerning the overall execution of the SLO process. The focus of this section was to gather perspective on how the SLO, as a policy instrument, would impact the agribusiness sector if it were to become a hard requirement. Participants were asked to identify if they saw a natural home based for the concept or a key figure that would ‘take the lead’ in seeing the concept put into action via relationships with consumers. Participants had the opportunity at the closing of the interviews to give their final view on the future of the agricultural SLO as a policy tool used by government and whether it should shape the future of the policy engagement process.

The perceptions of interview participants about whether the SLO framework prioritizes public opinion over evidence-based decision making was mixed. All participants felt quite strongly about creating policies that are well-informed and based on current and relevant science and evidence. However, there was an acknowledgement that it was not sufficient to rely solely
on hard facts when engaging consumers; storytelling and shared values were often cited as ways to break down knowledge barriers and work to establish trusting relationships. It appears that for the majority of participants who held positive views of the SLO framework, scientific evidence and appeals to shared values must be somehow balanced with more subjective deliberation to achieve results.

Participants that held views critical of the framework were concerned that, depending on the stakeholders involved, the direction of the SLO framework could shift back and forth between public opinion and scientific decision making, depending on the intended outcomes of the industry. Since these participants viewed the SLO framework as a public relations campaign, they felt that public opinion would only be prioritized if it fell in alignment with current industry beliefs, as thus would be claimed as earning ‘social license’. If not, then the framework would rely on scientific expertise to limit the influence of public attitudes on the policy process. One participant brought up the fact that framing the debate in a way that encourages “branding the other side as unscientific” (P-03, June 2017) was not necessarily beneficial for policy-making, as scientific consensus is constantly under revision and previously held truths are likely to be supplanted by new research. Ultimately, depending on the definition and the problem context, the focus of the SLO framework would vary depending on the policy actor in charge of its implementation.

One participant considered current work around the legalization of cannabis as an instance where the values underlying the SLO framework, led by public stakeholders, initiated policy change:

“I think that we are seeing a really good example of the social license framework right now, in the case for legalization of marijuana, and how that industry has gone from something that was criminal, to restricted to health purposes only, to now something that is simply restricted to adults and better understood in terms of
risks and benefits. I think that the industry has achieved this progress… because they worked through and managed the social licensing of the marketplace” (P-06: June 2017).

4.8 SLO as a Policy Requirement/ Government’s Role in the SLO Process

In response to prompts about the link between SLO and the policy making process overall, participants responded negatively but provided different rationales for their answers. One group asserted the SLO framework should not become a hard prerequisite for industry development because appropriate regulations and practices are already in existence, whether found in existing food safety regulations or in unwritten expectations around ethical behaviour. Formalizing the SLO framework would create redundancies for industry and policymakers alike and stifle the industry’s ability to effectively produce and innovate. This group of participants envisioned the framework as a process that would occur at the earliest stages of a policy debate or project development where it would serve as a reminder of the need to have the views of the consumer collected so as to avoid unanticipated interruptions.

A second group of participants, those largely skeptical of the framework, believed that making the SLO a policy requirement would not benefit the engagement process in any way. In their view, making the SLO framework a requirement would result in policy-makers being asked to implement marketing or other strategies around food production that would harm their role as an impartial mediator of conflicts between consumers and the agricultural sector. For policy-makers to shift from scrutinizing the industry to actively selling its virtues strikes a discordant note with this group. One participant stated that “the fact that food has to be relicensed through a multimillion-dollar public campaign is odd” (P-03, June 2017). In their view, this short term and campaign type attitude towards determining requirements would not foster stability or meaningful industry growth. Essentially, for this group of participants, the confused language
and parameters of the SLO framework would not translate into an effective system of required action, as it would add elements to the role of policy-makers that would only confuse expectations and strategic action.

Once again, participants disagreed on where the responsibility for a potential SLO framework should reside. The supporters of the SLO framework were more inclined to place government in either a leading or significant supporting role, citing the need for resource-sharing and collaboration across the fragmented supply chain. Supporters of the SLO framework were more likely to view the need for each stakeholder to take ownership of those areas of expertise that they are positioned closest to – for instance, environmental stewardship – and provide guidance to the rest of the industry on how best to interact with consumer concerns. In this manner, the entire food industry would be speaking in a coordinated and coherent manner. Policy-makers would then need to provide assurance and stability to the industry stakeholders that projects could be undertaken with the expectation that no sudden interruptions would occur due to public blowback.

The participants that were skeptical about the concept believed that industry associations should be responsible for the implementation and subsequent leadership of an SLO framework. Those participants saw the Earls case and other examples (such as those involving A&W’s fast-food chain) as good examples where the expressed views of the consumer initiated the debate but the response was led by industry stakeholders. They see these events as setting the tone for future discourse. In these cases, the SLO framework and ensuing language were intended to be shaped by the industry stakeholders to resolve a problem that could destabilize the industry. For this group of participants, this is significant as it allows industry stakeholders to define what action would be viewed as exceeding the parameters of social acceptability, or conversely
demonstrating what actions would be viewed as going beyond expectations of social responsibility. In effect, the ball remains in play between producers and consumers with regulators and policy people mostly observing.

Only two participants indicated that the public could have a leading role in any SLO framework’s implementation. This was driven by their view that the SLO framework encouraged collaboration and allowed opportunities to access communication tools and conversations that are not otherwise available. These participants discussed how the changing nature of communication would motivate consumers to use their voice, as the opportunities to be visible in the debate would increase. One participant stated that consumers who view themselves as activists would ultimately be able to develop momentum away from methods that were not to their liking, and then continuously seek to either retake charge of the SLO framework to enact policy change in line with their values.

The discussion of the SLO framework in a policy context revealed a great deal of hesitation around its implementation as a policy tool. Participants stated that agricultural policy should be based on scientific expertise; yet there was a divide over whether the methods used invited values to shape public policy in a positive manner. More specifically, the debate centered around whether the story-telling methods used would lead to more educated consumers or rather simply entrench current levels of polarization and mistrust, especially when framed by policy-makers with the authority to determine regulatory outcomes. Many participants viewed the SLO framework as an informal process of managing expectations and were reluctant to accept that it should become a further legal requirement beyond what is currently in place today. Many participants viewed either corporate or activist interests as appropriately in charge of implementing the SLO framework, with policy-makers in a supporting or neutral role.
4.5 Summary

Overall, the answers of the six interview participants provided rich insight into the agricultural SLO as introduced in a Saskatchewan context. Participants provided perspective into its most general definition, its place within the larger conversation of corporate social responsibility, its shared challenges with mining and other industries and thus the potential rationale for why agribusiness stakeholders would find it an attractive solution to the issues of declining trust and public engagement levels.

The below table aligns the responses of the participants to the variables of the SLO identified during the literature review. While the participants were speaking from a Saskatchewan perspective, there remains similar views on the time, scope, and the location of the SLO, while again highlighting how the amorphous nature of agricultural engagement has shifted the understanding of the ‘who’ and ‘how’ of gaining legitimacy and trust via this concept.

Table 4.1: SLO Variables in Mining vs Agriculture- Participant Perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SLO Variable</th>
<th>Agricultural SLO</th>
<th>Mining/Resource SLO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lead Expert/Identified</td>
<td>Unclear- agricultural industry is far reaching with too many players (e.g. water</td>
<td>Community stakeholders, company executives,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative</td>
<td>management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration/Time</td>
<td>Ongoing: can often occur at unexpected points in process or retroactively (to</td>
<td>Specific to the extractive project cycle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>correct or respond to value change)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Location</td>
<td>Unclear due to the —can fall into a “black box” due to individual consumption or</td>
<td>Impact mainly felt “in our own backyard”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>wherever industry has impacts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costs of Disruption</td>
<td>Economic, regulatory, sociocultural and health.</td>
<td>Primarily economic and regulatory Disruption is loss of project and investment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Disruption could change production, structure of regulatory ‘red tape’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scope/Range of Impact</th>
<th>Global - agricultural products</th>
<th>Localized—easy to identify the where and the who of the process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engagement/Source of Legitimacy</td>
<td>Producers in agriculture are considered behind in stakeholder engagement-agriculture held in different moral context than other industries and thus conflict is handled differently.</td>
<td>Seen as further along the stakeholder engagement process with clearly identified individuals/groups as essential to legitimacy process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Legitimacy depending on time/place in supply chain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emergence of third-party groups to engage with audience on behalf of industry.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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However, the participants remain skeptical as to the effectiveness of the SLO as an agricultural policy tool. Consensus among the participants about a cohesive definition for the SLO was missing and there was no agreement over potential metrics, who would lead the implementation, or the appropriate level of application. Agriculture specific problems also may not be directly addressed by the SLO, as participants argued for the unique moral and physical location inherent to agriculture and food production. Additionally, the media coverage of the Earls Restaurant case study and others similar to it may have impacted the introduction and reception of the SLO, according to participants. Analysis of the open-ended discussion around the case study revealed that the media coverage and response of ‘building awareness ‘and ‘sharing our story’ lead to shallow public engagement and worked against a solution of deeper public engagement with agribusiness, which worked to actually create greater risk in the future.
Ultimately, participants concluded that government should not implement the SLO as a policy standard or prerequisite for doing business. On the contrary, participants felt like the SLO was too unclear or could simply be replaced by other industry term. One view is that government use of the SLO may confuse or obstruct formal engagement processes such as the duty to consult or free, prior informed consent. Therefore, participants argued that government’s role in ensuring legitimate public engagement that minimizes disruption should emphasize an ongoing, two-way approach that goes beyond a vaguely defined, one-way flow of information used to gain a license to operate.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

5.1 Review of Findings

This thesis set out to address how effective of a policy tool is the SLO framework for meeting the changing needs of consumers? The thesis has offered a succinct analysis of theories relating to CSR, knowledge-based communication, and policy agenda setting, complemented with a brief Earls Restaurant case study and a series of interviews of Saskatchewan agricultural stakeholders conducted to better understand the policy implications of the SLO in this sector. Since SLO has been studied almost exclusively in the corporate sphere, and the Ministry of Agriculture’s framework was only recently introduced, this thesis explored a gap in the current understanding of this concept.

This thesis argues that the current agricultural SLO is not an effective policy instrument for addressing consumer expectations and values. The deep divide over its definition, objectives, and uniqueness has raised questions over its intended purpose and what defines successful implementation. While the agricultural sector has wicked problems similar to mining that need engagement strategies, the policy learning process moved the concept well beyond its initial scope from the mining industry and struggled to meet the needs of a heavily fragmented and specialized sector. The Earls Restaurants’ controversy reveals the entrenchment of the knowledge deficit model of scientific communication within the agricultural SLO, which creates the risk of narrow one-way engagement. This research finds that pursuing the SLO as a policy instrument risk entrenching policy images and venues that do not meaningfully respond to consumer values. Respondents affirmed that this could result in further public opposition and a switch to other engagement frameworks, reducing the SLO to an ineffective figure of speech.
Much of the primary research for this thesis was done in 2017-8. Since then, SLO conversations have waned. Industry continues to engage with stakeholders and the public but in a less structured and formulaic way. While public trust continues to be a division featured in the Government of Saskatchewan’s Ministry of Agriculture, it is now housed under the Communications Branch instead of the Programs or Regional Services Branch where it was previously located (Ministry of Agriculture, 2023). This would seem to indicate that the Government of Saskatchewan’s role in building public trust has shifted from policy to information services.

Policy-makers in the agricultural sector have become more cautious about discussing the SLO framework, or any similarly structured process, as a policy instrument for communicating and building trust. Engagement frameworks are very important to policy-makers and will become more so as policy problems grow more ‘wicked’ and encompass an increasing number of social arenas. However, the knowledge-deficit-model-influenced SLO framework does not have the capacity to address the root issues behind loss of trust and legitimacy as its unclear definition and purpose fails to provide guidance to the sector. This research reaffirms the importance of developing a grounded, neutral, long-term approach, as exemplified by various opportunities for public comment in regulatory processes and the rapidly evolving duty to consult process currently enshrined in Canadian policy and legal discourses for First Nations and Indigenous peoples. This finding agrees with Newman (2014) who recommended policy-makers remain distant from SLO debates.

In the future, policy-makers and corporate leaders who want to jointly build consensus around critical policy issues must ensure that the tools they utilize truly address the underlying problems that result in declining trust. While it may be well-intentioned and desirable to
implement a common plan and resources, the lessons from the SLO’s transition from the natural resources sector to agriculture reveals the risks of redefining a concept to the point where stakeholders are not clear about its purpose or implementation. While the agricultural SLO framework currently provides policy-makers with an approach to engaging consumers, questions remain about its effectiveness in truly addressing the root causes of declining trust, as it is likely to focus on immediately tangible images, “instead of improving performance where it matters” (Bursey, 2015; p.9). To resolve issues of public trust in the agricultural sector, policy-makers should ensure that their engagement processes are clearly defined, responsive, and accountable.

5.2 Policy Recommendations

The interviews reveal that the ‘social license’ terminology often has a negative impact on how the framework is received. As the concept has altered significantly from its origins in the mining industry, and lacks industry-wide consensus, it will continue to send mixed signals to the public who hold specific expectations of the SLO framework due to previous usage. Therefore, if agriculture is to pursue a strategy towards increased public trust, it is recommended that another term be used for the sake of clarity and agricultural specific contexts.

Following that initial recommendation, three possible options have been identified for the future of the SLO framework in the policy space:

**Option 1: Discontinue the framework completely.**
By choosing to not engage with the SLO framework, policy-makers may satisfy critics of the concept who believe that it erodes impartiality and evidence-based decision making. Choosing to let this framework remain the primary instrument of private industry and the public will reduce concerns that policy-makers are picking ‘winners’ or ‘losers’, or intervening to the point of overreaction, as indicated by the interview participants that felt that this concept only superficially engaged with the key issues facing industry and government stakeholders in this sector. Since there are no clear measurements to determine whether the concept is having a positive impact on trust levels in government and industry, continuing to spend time and finances on this framework could potentially result in little to no clear return on investment.

Alternatively, discontinuing the SLO framework may represent government withdrawal from public engagement at a time where this is increasingly necessary. Choosing to shelve this approach could lead to the deterioration of relationships within the sector and a continued loss of trust and legitimacy. It is important to note here that while the participants disagreed on the character and role of the SLO framework in agricultural policy-making, they all identified the need to address wicked problems and issues of trust and communication, to ensure that policy-makers were making well-informed decisions. Discontinuing the use of the framework without determining what the role of policy-makers or corporate leaders will be in the future could create a vacuum where unclear and unmet expectations reduce legitimacy even further.

Option 2: Retain the framework in its current form.

As the concept is still new to Saskatchewan’s agricultural policy space, there could be undiscovered potential benefits to continuing the framework in its current form. As of this
writing, the Ministry of Agriculture is currently leading by example in this area, as other
government ministries or departments have not approached the SLO framework in such a formal
manner. Time and additional exposure to the framework may result in additional collected data
and further clarification of appropriate roles for advocacy organizations such as Farm and Food
Care Saskatchewan. Maintaining framework could result in strengthened partnerships for these
organizations that work on the advocacy and educational aspects of a sector and previously
unrealized opportunities for collection of information and measurements of policy impact.

However, this awareness-based framework will still be subject to critiques that it is not
facilitating two-way engagement and is partial to defending industry against negative
consequences resulting from poor decision-making. Financial and logistical support for
organizations such as the Centre for Food Integrity and Farm and Food Care Saskatchewan could
be viewed as actions partial to industry instead of supporting consumer-led processes. Recently,
the creation of Farm and Food Care Prince Edward Island came under criticism for failing to
support the needs of all agricultural producers equally (Campbell, 2018). By continuing to have
advocacy organizations communicate on an issue-by-issue basis, rather than through a more
neutral and long-term process, there is a risk that the disconnect between different levels of the
value chain will continue to foster opposition and frustration.

**Option 3: Retain the framework but add solid evaluation metrics.**

This thesis, while illustrating areas of concern with the SLO framework, has found that
the agricultural sector needs an approach to address wicked problems and loss of trust. The
current framework’s approach centers on creating awareness around specific issues related to
food and food production, and the Ministry of Agriculture’s framework supports industry efforts to address these issues. If the focus on the framework shifted from creating awareness around issues, an approach based on the knowledge deficit model and lacking metrics for success, the potential for success in grappling with wicked problems would increase. Choosing instead to measure the success of the engagement efforts themselves would be more suited to a policy-maker’s purview, as it creates a more neutral and accountable process.

A potential template for this recommendation can be found in Jim Macnamara’s (2016) architecture of listening, as described in his book *Organizational Listening: The Missing Essential in Public Communication*. Here, Macnamara (2016) describes the need for organizations, including government, to revisit their engagement practices and policies to avoid superficial engagement. A key aspect of this is the “evaluation factor” (Macnamara 2016, p. 240), which asks organizations to measure their outreach based on their own success at meeting public expectations, rather than metrics associated with the number of outreach sessions conducted, or variety of methods used. This approach reduces the inefficiencies in conducting multiple engagement activities on an issue-by-issue basis, while also providing clear metrics that can be used to determine long term success.

The possible negative aspect of this recommendation is that this process is less high profile than the issue-by-issue approach to engagement. As interview participants discussed, engaging consumers is a difficult task, regardless of media coverage levels. However, trends of disengagement and apathy are common in all industries claiming the need for public engagement (Macnamara, 2016), a sign that current approaches to engagement are at a turning-point moment. Regaining and maintaining trust is not something that is resolved quickly, or through the implementation of a singular ‘magic bullet’ solution. Instead, ensuring that the emphasis is on
long-term goals, rather than cycling through the most recent engagement tool, can ensure that the public views the commitment to improvement as legitimate as well as the process itself.

5.3 Limitations and areas for further study

This study is partial and limited. The Earls Restaurant case is illuminating but not conclusive. There have been a host of other food-related controversies in the intervening period that would offer insight into social license. Similarly, the source population and respondent pool was severely limited, for a host of reasons beyond the scope of this study. Future studies should look at alternate ways to gather and assess the opinions of the widening array of stakeholders in the sector and supply chain.

Another approach to further study the SLO framework in agriculture would be to focus on members of the supply chain closer to consumers, including such advocacy organizations as Farm and Food Care, Agriculture in the Classroom, and the Centre for Food Integrity. These organizations have added significant complexity to the value chain and their impact on stakeholders and communication flows can and should be measured. Little is known about how producers and consumers interact and view the activities of these organizations and what value is produced through their efforts.

Another avenue of examining the viability of the SLO framework is to research its presence in industries that are not resource-based or heavily industrialized, such as tourism, various professions or the education system. Continuing to compare the approaches of different industries to SLO will help to determine if the framework will continue to have a measurable impact on society, or if may simply be replaced by a different concept that better reflects the discussion around the social responsibility or legitimacy of corporate and policy actors.
Further attention could also be given to policy communications overall. Whether it is a deeper study of the principles discussed in Macnamara’s (2016) argument for organizational listening, or a re-evaluation of how policy-makers approach public engagement, there must be changes made to ensure that the public is meaningfully reflected in policy debate. Designing and facilitating engagement processes should not be viewed as routine tasks to be checked off, but rather as integral to the foundation of the policy itself. As the problems facing society grow more complex, so too should the processes used to engage the public in developing solutions.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX: Full Ethics Package

THE SOCIAL LICENSE TO OPERATE: POLICY-MAKING AND TRUST IN SASKATCHEWAN’S AGRI-FOOD INDUSTRY.

Student Investigator: Amanda Sampson
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Invitation to Participate in Research Project

I, Amanda Sampson, a Masters of Public Policy student, from the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, invite you to participate in a research project entitled “The Social License to Operate: Policy-Making and Trust in Saskatchewan’s Agri-Food Industry.”

The purpose of this research project is to assess the potential impact of the social license framework as it transitions from the mining industry into the agri-food sector. Recently, agri-food organizations, such as Earls Restaurant, have experienced issues of ‘social license’ or public opposition. The outcomes of this research will identify how government officials, industry decision-makers, and advocacy groups view the social license and its impact on their ability to meet consumer expectations. This research will benefit agri-food stakeholders looking to renew public trust and maintain legitimate and sustainable business operations.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in either an in person or telephone interview. The expected duration of the interview is no longer than 20 minutes.
You will have the opportunity to review the transcript and signed a release form before your input is analyzed and published. All information that you provide is considered completely confidential; indeed your name will not be associated with the data collected in the study. You have the right to refrain from answering any question or withdraw your information at any time without penalty.

If you have any pertinent questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Saskatchewan’s Behavioural Ethics Committee. They can be contacted through the Research Ethics Office by email (ethics.office@usask.ca) or by phone: 306-966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free 888-966-2975.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me or my supervisor using the contact information above. Thank you for your consideration, and we look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you,
Amanda Sampson
Master of Public Policy Candidate
Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy University of Saskatchewan
306-230-4577
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
Michael Atkinson

DEPARTMENT
Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy

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INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CONDUCTED
Saskatchewan

STUDENT RESEARCHER(S)
Amanda Sumpson

FINANCING
UNFUNDED

TITLE
Social License to Operate: Trust and Saskatchewan's Agri-Food Industry

ORIGINAL REVIEW DATE
18-Apr-2017

APPROVAL ON
01-May-2017

APPROVAL OF
Application for Behavioural Research Ethics Review
Letter of Invitation
Participant Consent Form
Interview Questions
Transcript Release Form

EXPIRY DATE
30-Apr-2018

CERTIFICATION: The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Sask-BREB) is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2 2018). The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above named research project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol or consent process or documents.

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Research Ethics Board consideration in advance of its implementation.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS: In order to receive annual renewal, a progress report must be submitted to the BREB Chair for Board consideration within one month prior to the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion. Please refer to the following website for further instructions: http://research.usask.ca/for-researchers/eht/submit-an-up

Vivian Ramsden, Chair
University of Saskatchewan
Behavioural Research Ethics Board

Please send all correspondence to:
Research Ethics Office
University of Saskatchewan
Box 8900 HPO University, 225-116 Science Place
Saskatoon SK S7N 5E8
Telephone: (306) 966-2515 Fax: (306) 966-2038
THE SOCIAL LICENSE TO OPERATE: POLICY-MAKING AND TRUST IN SASKATCHEWAN’S AGRI-FOOD INDUSTRY.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Section 1: Definition and Background

- How would you define the social license? What factors are involved, who is required to be part of decision-making, etc.?
- How would you define corporate social responsibility?
- Do you agree with the perception that there has been declining trust in the agri-food industry? Please explain your answers.
- As you know, the social license developed within the Canadian mining context. What are the most important differences between the mining industry and the agri-food industry? What are some similarities?
- What are the difficulties in the agri-food industry in regards to engaging the public, and what potential qualities of the social license appears to address these difficulties, in your view?
- What mechanisms have been utilized to work towards public trust/social license for the industry?

Section 2: Application and Case Study

- In 2016, Earl’s Restaurant made the decision to switch beef suppliers from Alberta producers to a U.S.-based company, igniting significant controversy over ethical business practices. This instance is widely cited as a public example of social license in action. (Globe and Mail, 2016).
- What does this specific example of the social license in action reveal the media’s role in developing trust in the agri-food industry?
- In your view, what has this example revealed about the changing nature of communicating information to stakeholders? What has it revealed about measuring and predicting consumer responses to decisions?

Section 3: Analysis and Evaluation

- In your view, is the social license going to be a requirement/prerequisite for being in business? Please explain your answers.
- Who would you expect to “take the lead” for embedding the social license in the agri-food industry? Is this an industry led phenomena, or is there potential for the government to make this a requirement?
- If different, who ‘should’ have influence over a social license?
- The social license places an emphasis on community needs and approval over traditional processes. In your view, will the implementation of a social license framework risk prioritizing public opinion over scientific/evidence based decision-making when providing goods and services?
- What role should the social license have, if any, in policy and management decision-making processes?
# Behavioural Closure

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