




A review of qualitative investigation of food safety based on good governance

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Abstract

Food safety agencies (FSAs) were formed across the globe as part of a series of food risk (FR) governance changes made in reaction to ongoing food crises in an endeavor to control increasingly industrialized, globalized, and hazardous food chains. Given such substantial changes in governance, little research has been done on how consumers react to, reject, and/or participate with the mentioned new governance systems in non-crisis situations. As a result, the current study looks at how FR is managed on a daily basis from the consumers' perspective, whose voices are often ignored in food policies. Consumer lived experiences, priorities, and views pertaining to FR governance and the food safety (FS) authority, in particular, are investigated using empirical data from focus groups performed with the general public. This study is framed by a normative framework of multi-scalar governance and what makes it successful or good. As a result, the study promotes FR policy discussions via the lens of normative good FR governance, involving a consumer-perceived assessment of the perceived accountability, openness, and efficacy of FR governing mechanisms. The article closes by constructively considering the potential and constraints of adopting more adaptable forms of governance in the multi-scalar and changing the policy framework that defines FR.

Keywords: accountability; consumers; good governance; food risk.

Practical Application: Considering the potential of adopting more adaptable forms of governance in the multi-scalar and changing policy framework that defines FR.

1 Introduction

Eating habits are ingrained in modern society. As a result, it should come as no surprise that intellectual and policy circles continue to pay close attention to its governance. Indeed, a significant study has been done to date on several issues relating to the global food system, such as food sustainability, security, and safety (Tiozzo et al., 2017; Tucker et al., 2006). The governance of FR, from perceived genetically modified (GM) danger to chemical food pollutants, avian influenza, and BSE (Cheftel, 2011; Devaney, 2016; Tiozzo et al., 2017), is a major focus of much of this study. Nevertheless, most of this research concentrates on risk governance under crisis or difficult situations. Furthermore, it frequently disregards the perspectives of the ultimate beneficiaries of food control, namely, consumers.

Although certain outliers demand more consumer participation in food policy arenas, the governance of ordinary eating in non-emergency situations has received little public attention (Ansell & Baur, 2018; Boatemaa et al., 2019; Collins et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018). Food hazards have increased dramatically in previous years as food production has increased, resulting in chemical, microbiological, technical, and physical food dangers (Chammem et al., 2018; Chatzopoulou, 2019). In order to safeguard public health, minimize economic costs, and retain customer trust, there is a clear need for effective, efficient, and dependable FR regulating mechanisms (Barling, 2018). Certainly, the BSE crisis of the 1990s sparked a slew of FS governance changes aimed at regaining public confidence (Lloyd et al., 2006).

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This includes better-integrated FS laws, private market FS governance systems, and the creation of European FS institutions (Chen & Yu, 2022; Mitterer-Daltoé et al., 2021).

Given these substantial changes in governance, little research has been done on how the public interacts with, trusts, and is conscious of these new FR governance institutions (Wu et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2015; Zhu et al., 2019). Consumer views of such new institutions' responsibility, openness, and efficacy, in particular, have not been well researched. Consumer views, priorities, and lived experiences in FR governance are examined in this article in order to close this gap (Liu et al., 2019; Verbruggen & Havinga, 2017). The article is based on the findings of consumer focus groups that were performed as part of a larger study that looked at both professional and lay perceptions of FR governance. This larger study included video, internet, and media studies, thirty semi-structured interviews with stakeholders throughout

the food sector, and eight consumer focus groups. This article provides a sophisticated view of consumer FR governance perceptions and involvement in non-crisis situations, based on the comprehensive examination of stakeholder positioning in Devaney (2013) and consumer perceptions of FR during food peace-time in Devaney (2015).

As illustrated in Figure 1, FR governance in Ireland entails a sophisticated collection of players working throughout scales and industries to assure the safety of food supplied, delivered, or sold throughout the country. The whole general framework for FS governance is depicted in Figure 2, which also comprises various parts of management, evaluation, assessment, framing, and the cross-cutting activities of FS communication and public involvement, the full set of possible interactions and feedback between all of these stages, and the institutional bases to which the various tasks are assigned.

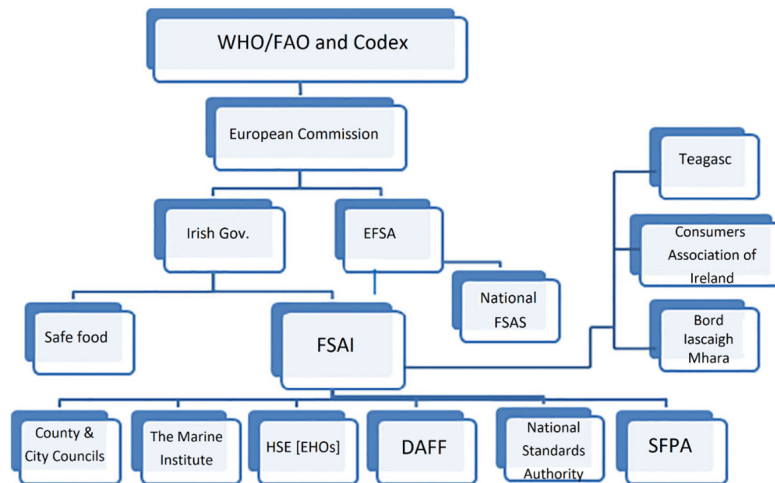


Figure 1. Ireland's web of FR governance: FS Authority of Ireland (FSAI), European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), related Environmental Health Officers (EHOs), Health Services Executive (HSE), Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA), and Department of Agriculture (DAFF).

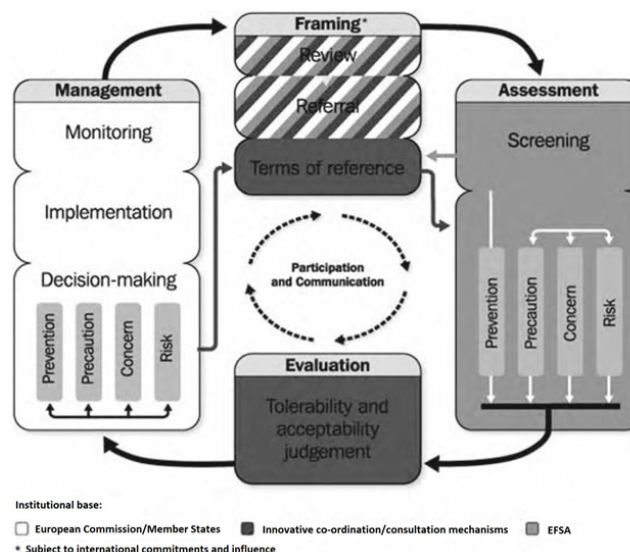


Figure 2. A comprehensive depiction of the general framework, including job assignment by institutions.

Critical public comprehension of science (Boer et al., 2005), comprehending consumer risk perceptions (Byrd et al., 2021; Jenkins et al., 2021; Phillips & Hallman, 2013), and considering the connections among risk, expertise, and institutional adaptation (Herwig & Pang, 2019), have all received a lot of interest in academic literature. Furthermore, research of consumption, such as the desire to spend (Díaz et al., 2012; Lyford et al., 2010), give useful knowledge on food consumption patterns, yet they are restricted in their capacity to investigate the social intricacies of faith and commitment in food regulatory systems. While recognizing the underlying research, this study focuses on consumer perceptions of the efficiency and usefulness of food regulatory systems based on a set of good governance concepts (Addink, 2019; Campanale et al., 2021).

Due to the limited amount of precise and objective measurements of governance effectiveness, the application of universally acknowledged good governance principles serves as a baseline for comparison and a goal to aim towards in the pursuit of ideal governance (Schutter et al., 2020; Sartorius & Kirsten, 2007). Since policymakers are under pressure to improve the transparency and accountability of risk management systems, little research has been done on how consumers perceive these aspects and how to accomplish them in reality. This research fills in the gaps by examining consumer perceptions of national FR governance methods based on current good governance principles.

2 Governance and trust as conceptual frames

The necessity to go past conventional state limits in order to create global and transnational remedies to environmental challenges has been emphasized during the last century. Numerous modern dangers, such as air pollution, genetic engineering, and food risk, are thought to transcend physical and temporal limits (Basak et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2021). In order to regulate such complicated challenges, a complex and frequently opposing collection of actors has evolved, all striving to supply answers and influence policy at various scales. The concept of “governance” has emerged as an organizing paradigm for comprehending both new and existing regulatory interactions. Although governance is a contentious phrase, one of the more impartial definitions describes it as the norms and structures that regulate the legitimate organization of communal life. Despite this, the scientific research on governance is extremely fragmented, with clear variations in perceptions of the phenomenon’s origins and a wide range of sectoral specializations (Makadok & Coff, 2009). Likewise, perspectives on what defines effective governance differ, making it difficult to assess governance performance (GP) accurately and objectively.

In summary, good governance entails a change away from red tape, secrecy, maladministration, inefficiency, and corruption and instead emphasizes governance responsiveness, fairness, inclusivity, effectiveness, transparency, and accountability (Garske et al., 2020; Giloyan & Berkok, 2016; Immink, 2010; Pérez-Escamilla et al., 2017). Furthermore, it is stated that, given EFSA governance changes and the following formation of FSAs, Europe has witnessed a paradox of progress in regulating FR (Baram & Bourrier, 2011). With more stringent standards & complex food regulatory procedures,

Europe has seen an increase in the frequency of food crises in recent years. Dioxin pollution, avian influenza, BSE, salmonella, and E. coli are only a few cases (Halford, 2019). FR analysis techniques and associated regulating entities have lost public trust as a result of such occurrences, which have been compounded by worries about new technology (e.g., GM).

3 Methodology

The literature debates whether daily publics should be defined as citizens or consumers. The latter is linked with ideologies of personal self-interest and the former with concepts of communal duty for ecological and social commons (Ranchordas, 2018). Recent research, especially in the domains of environmentally sustainable consumerism and legislation, suggests that the daily public is transitioning from consumers to citizens. On the other hand, this shift is neither universal nor constant in all facets of daily life (Clarke et al., 2007; Lewis et al., 2005). The purpose of the research provided in this paper was to include the average diner (consumer) in its evaluation without making any preconceptions about citizens’ responsibilities, morality, or political engagement in food governance, whether as lobbyists, advocates, or food activists (citizen). As a result, the study avoids making judgments about prior contributions or participation with FR governance venues instead of focusing on the views and experiences of people directly impacted by regulatory choices and actions performed by such governing actors daily. Although several non-academic studies provide baseline FR perception information (Han & Yan, 2019), these appear to concentrate on personalized customer attitudes rather than investigating how consumers acquire and explain their opinions. As a result, there was a need to investigate consumer views of FR governance in a more representative manner of how people get along in everyday situations.

3.1 Selection of participants

Since this is qualitative research, no attempt was made to collect a representative sample of Ireland’s population. Instead, hosting eight focus groups permitted a more in-depth study of various customer perspectives (49 in total) across a range of demographics impacting risk and consumer behavior. As indicated in Table 1, these factors included income, living situation, education, age, and gender (Stranieri et al., 2017).

A natural focus group technique was used to attract members, with recruits taken from pre-existing groups like social or sports clubs (Gaižauskaitė, 2012; Kontio et al., 2008; Parker & Tritter, 2006). Reduced fear between participants and improved desire to participate and argue with acquainted group members are said to be benefits of this technique over forming focus groups of strangers (Freitas et al., 1998). Focus group discussions were guided by a flexible subject guide derived from a previous literature study, consultations with other experts, and prototype focus group sessions.

3.2 Analyzing data

All eight mentioned focus group meetings were transcribed verbatim for analysis, which added to the results’ dependability,

Table 1. Demographics of the focus group.

Name	Location	Income	Education	Living environment	Age	Gender
Community gardeners	Cork	Mixed	Mixed	Urban	30-65	Mixed
FÁS group	Dublin	Lower	Lower	Urban	30-65	Male
ICA group	Galway	Mixed	Lower	Rural	56+	Female
Mindful parents	Galway	Mixed	Mixed	Urban	26-45	Mixed
Office workers	Dublin	Mixed	Middle	Urban	36-55	Mixed
Retirement association	Cork	Lower	Lower	Rural	66+	Mixed
Sports players	Galway	Lower	Middle	Rural	18-35	Male
Students	Dublin	Lower	Higher	Rural	18-35	Female

integrity, and profundity. NVivo, a data management program, was used to assist make sense of the unstructured replies. While this qualitative computer software program was not capable of analyzing the data or drawing conclusions, it did allow for extensive data storage and organization. While numerous difficulties surfaced during focus group talks and various inconsistencies between and within groups and individual replies, certain topics and snippets relevant to the paper's topic may be brought out. The topics of governance responsibility, openness, and efficacy, which serve as unique points of reference for consumers when contemplating everyday FR governance, give insight into the psyche of a broad spectrum of consumers about national food governing regimes.

4 Results

Even though disputed interpretations of governance, challenges evaluating regulation on the ground, and presumptions about what constitutes the "best" model of governance make objective interpretations of GP complicated, applying good governance principles can help clarify consumer experiences and perceptions with FR governance practices (Martinez et al., 2007; Zach et al., 2012). Considering the importance of these checks in assessing overall GP and promoting consumer trust in regulatory risk systems, the study will focus on concepts of effectiveness, transparency, and accountability (Caduff & Bernauer, 2006; Hutter, 2011). According to Osabohien et al. (2020), governance accountability is officials answering to stakeholders about how they use their duties, powers, and choices; acting on complaints or requirements directed at them; and accepting responsibility for failure and incompetence or deception. Therefore, FSA's duties to clarify and defend their behavior to the public who rely on their actions and judgments would be included in FR governance accountability. The ability of the FSA to face questioning, judgment, and penalties imposed by an external forum might also be taken into account. This is especially significant because FSA board members are not chosen by the public, which raises questions about the legitimacy of non-elected players in multi-level governance domains (Lele et al., 2013).

According to Reeve (2013), transparent systems should have explicit methods for public decision-making, open communication channels, and open access to a wider variety of information by interested parties. Transparency is also an essential feature of legitimacy in the context of private food governance, according

to Fuchs et al. (2011), since it allows for more public visibility and scrutiny in complicated contexts. According to the authors, external actors' access to information is a key indicator of governance transparency. FR governance processes and structures must be assessable and available by interested parties in order to ensure openness. Finally, in terms of efficacy, FR regulating organizations' outputs should fulfill societal requirements in a way that maximizes financial and institutional resources while avoiding harm to the public health and environment.

Only four out of 49 participants (FÁS, parent, and office worker) instinctively pointed to the FSAI as an existing site for FR responsibility in this survey, indicating that there is a lack of awareness and understanding of the FSAI and unprompted referrals to it across all groups. This is in line with the findings of the FSAI, which found that just 8% of consumers recognized the FSAI as a major FS regulating agency on the spot. This recurring finding implies that not much has altered in the ten years between study studies. Furthermore, it indicates a significant lack of consumer knowledge of the FSAI's obligations, raising concerns that if customers are unaware of the institution's responsibilities, they will not hold it responsible for its activities, challenge its conduct, or inflict any external punitive repercussions. If asked about the FSAI, most groups (including female students, ICA members, mindful parents, and retired participants) claimed to be familiar with its idea. Many claimed to have heard of it but were unsure of its particular functions. When questioned, most participants thought that the FSAI inspects food business operators rather than the Authority's existing environmental health officers. Similarly, FS and athletes incorrectly ascribed a nutrition mandate to the Authority, while a number of the community garden, workplace, and parent customers were completely unaware of the FSAI. From consumers' perspective, this indicates a blurring of duties in Irish FR regulatory systems, with consequences for any possible responsibility required of these organizations. All of these findings point to FR management systems that aren't fully publicly accountable or responsive to consumers when it comes to the use of their powers, duties, and choices, much less subject to actual sanctions in the event of negligence or incompetence. Therefore, consumer experiences of FSAI messages, including their content, assessment ability, accessibility, and frequency, were closely connected to consumer perceptions of transparency in focus group settings. Several customers in this study reported dissatisfaction with the amount of clear FS information given from a communications standpoint.

Despite the fact that retired and sports participants were satisfied with present communication methods, FS participants demanded a greater FS message for future generations.

A community gardener expressed similar sentiments, stating that there is a clear absence of FS information (even on the FSAI website), especially during non-crisis seasons. This participant observes no frequent updates on the FSAI website addressing daily FS surveillance, which is typical of the focus on food scares over ordinary food governance. In everyday settings, the FSAI is regarded by this participant as lacking open, frequent, and independent communications, which contradicts ideas of good normative governance and effective public health agency communication. This conclusion mirrors transparency checks, in which participants stated a need for more information and improved visibility in food supply chain procedures, as well as worries that information is hidden from the public in cases of food fraud. Female students who took part in the study expressed similar concerns about a lack of clear FS information in daily life and inconsistent signals being presented. This was especially true in terms of the health effects of various foods. Similarly, ICA members' proclivity for shifting FS attitudes leads them to believe that institutional FR messages should be treated with caution or skepticism. This implies that FR communication has recently lost its credibility. Moving down to a more local level, students, sports players, and ICA participants questioned the openness, frequency, and results of food business operators' inspections managed by the FSAI.

Consumer views and understanding of FR duties, interactions, and food business operators' investigations, on the other hand, point to a lack of openness in Ireland's FR governance framework. Furthermore, views of the efficacy of FR governance in Ireland produced mixed findings in focus groups, possibly reflecting the most all-encompassing, albeit subjective, assessment of GP. The FSAI's capacity to police food risk, its independence from industry pressures, perceived achievements and failures to date, and general faith in institutional activities and performance were all implicitly connected to efficiency, albeit not specifically stated by the participants. The FSAI has problems in implementing the all-encompassing principles of good governance, with consumers recognizing a variety of shortcomings in present regulatory frameworks. This is especially true in Ireland, given the public's apparent aversion to interacting with food regulatory organizations. However, numerous consumers indicated a desire for their voices to be heard in food policy development and implementation processes in order to enhance future FR governance. According to female students in one study, improved FS teaching and learning might encourage children to ask questions at home and adults to interact with FSAs. Consumer organizations across the board expressed a need for food regulatory agencies to interact more closely with local community groups. As demonstrated in this study, the natural focus group technique may be used to integrate consumer perspectives in governance arenas, gather feedback, and explain any consumer misconceptions concerning FS.

5 Conclusion

Using a good governance conceptual model to comprehend and examine consumer perceptions of FR governance performance

and identify opportunities for future improvement, this paper highlights the effectiveness of using theory and empirical evidence to illustrate the value of using a good governance structure to acknowledge and analyze consumer perceptions of FR governance performance. Good governance principles serve as objectives and benchmarks for how governing institutions should operate and conduct, despite the fact that they are not without politics and contestation. When implemented in the Irish FR environment, it is clear that while the FSAI demonstrates certain aspects of good governance, it does not fully include all concepts. As a result, governance disparities persist for the FSAI, indicating the inclination for just a few organizations to attain high governance overall.

Nevertheless, assessing GP is only the first step toward effective governance. The issue now is to put stronger effectiveness, transparency, and accountability metrics in place, which will need adequate support and may be more challenging to do in practice. And besides, being accountable for actions and decisions taken is one of the most important aspects of accountability, as evidenced by the elevated use of risk assessment as a more robust approach for decision-making of FR all over Europe, as well as calls for FR assessment and management separation tasks. Even though this study's recommendations don't serve as a roadmap for bettering future risk regulatory frameworks throughout the world, they offer policy learning opportunities in Ireland and elsewhere. However, great attention needs to be given to developing regionally responsive FR securitization regimes, with the need to adjust good governance and involvement models to domestic historical, social, political, and economic circumstances. These results highlight the need to conduct national-level FR governance assessments throughout the world.

FSAs must evolve and stay responsive through an adaptive governance framework to combat existing and future threats in the midst of shifting governing interactions in the globalized food chain. As a result, FSAs must adapt their principles and regulations to better meet the basic requirements and values of the customers who depend on the institution's governance arrangements for their functioning and legality. This devotion should be based on the requirements and desires of the customers in the case of FSAs. FR governance methods must be sensitive and adaptive to changing crisis, economic, social, political, and environmental situations. To comply with defined good governance principles, consumer opinion must play a central role as outlined in this paper and advocated under multiple adaptive governance frameworks. However, this does not mean that experts are completely excluded from the management process; rather, an adaptive governance approach sits in the middle of the two polar extremes, recognizing the important contribution that non-state actors can make to policy processes, as this paper also highlights.

Current economic turmoil may create a golden opportunity for transition to more adaptable food regulating regimes, similar to the recurrent recurrence of food crises in Europe in the 1990s and early 2000s, which prompted FS governance reform. This strategy is far more favorable to waiting for the next food crisis to force government transformation. FSAs may become more proactive, respected, adaptable, and long-lasting organizations

in the future as a result of this approach. To put it another way, they may become more responsible, transparent, and successful institutions. Though not an idealistic answer, creating flexible and adaptable governance techniques that can switch between crisis and non-crisis situations is a key element of successful future governance regimes. The goal is to develop a regulatory structure that is both rigorous enough to prevent food crises and flexible enough to adapt when the FR environment changes. In this approach, the obvious “paradox of a crisis” may be avoided, demonstrating the value of FSAs during times of food peace and allowing the government to be judged “excellent” without the necessity for a crisis.

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