Consumer Response to Food Scandals and Scares

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Nearly half of European consumers think that the food they eat damages their health. Consumers fear the unknown the most. The European food safety system is based on the premise that safety must be guaranteed throughout the food chain if the health of consumers is to be protected. The ever-emerging risks, the fear of the unknown, especially of new techniques and technologies and anything considered to be “unnatural” or artificial or hard to be understood make consumers worried despite the safety of their food declared by experts. Therefore, accurate, reliable and well-timed information about risks is crucial to insure consumers’ safety, measure their risk perception and there is a need to avoid overreaction or hysteria of consumers under real or possible food safety threats. Sensitising consumers might be important in the light of an emerging risk or in case of a worsening food safety situation or an emerging outbreak, but an exaggerated warning campaign could lead to lost sensitivity, especially upon repetition.

Due to socio-economical, sociological, environmental changes and the technological progress, we must face a great number of problems and questions to be solved, which determine our future. Nevertheless, we deal neither institutionally nor at a scientific research level systematically with ethical issues related to agricultural and food sciences appearing in the food chain. Ethical, social, economic, religious and other so-called legitimate factors may affect decision-makers in the risk management and these factors have to be taken into consideration alongside the risk perception of consumers. It is equally important to collect information on the attitude of consumers including their fears and uncertainties. Uncertainty needs to be recognised and understood in order to build trust to be able to establish credibility. A structured dialogue has to be promoted between Science & Society and there is a need to provide targeted information for responsible decisions to be made and to allow informed choices.

Prof. Dr. Diána Bánáti got her M.Sc. degree in food engineering in 1990. She was qualified as a teacher (M.A.) in 1996 and she obtained an M.A. in Law in 1998. She got her C.Sc. degree (Ph.D.) in agricultural sciences at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS) in 1996. She obtained dr. habil at the University of Debrecen in 2006. Prof. Bánáti is the Director General of the Central Food Research Institute (CFRI) since 2000. She was responsible for the establishment of the National Food Safety Office in Hungary in 2002 as a Ministerial Commissioner for Food Safety. She is a Titular University Professor of the Szent István University since 2003 and at University of Szeged since 2007, as well. She plays an active role in M.Sc. and postgraduate education being the head of the Department of Food Science of the Szent István University and Department of Food Regulatory Sciences and Consumer Science of the Corvinus University of Budapest affiliated to the CFRI. She is a qualified expert in food safety, food policy and food regulatory sciences; she has a wide research experience in food science. Her current research interest is focused food safety, food policy, consumer science and agricultural ethics. Prof. Bánáti is a member in several national and international organizations (EFSA, EGE, OECD, FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius, ILSI Europe, etc.). She is involved in several research projects and international co-operation in the field of food safety with and consumer sciences. She was the vice-chair of the Management Board of the European Food Safety Authority (2006-2008) and currently she is the chair of the Management Board of EFSA (2008-present).