

Reasons behind inadequate local food control resources

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Abstract

To determine the reasons for inadequate resources in local food control, municipalities with less than half of the required resources (minor resourced group) were compared with other municipalities in Finland. Factors that could explain inadequate resources were identified as a low number of food experts in the municipal council, delegation of decision-making to a lower level in the hierarchy and poor skills of local officials in lobbying funds, as well as weaker economic condition, stronger business activity, higher population density and large net migration. The percentage of approved in-house control systems was significantly lower in the minor resourced group. Municipalities with outbreaks also had significantly smaller environmental health protection costs per inhabitant than municipalities with no outbreaks. These results show that local decisions concerning the structure of control organs can have considerable consequences on the efficiency of control work.

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1. Introduction

Food control is one of the key elements to ensure safe food for consumers. Transition from controls performed by officials only to Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) and higher responsibility of food operators has changed the working environment of food control officials during the last decade in Europe. At the same time, significant changes have occurred in the food production chain due to globalization, emerging risks and increasing demand for transparent decision-making. In the European Commission's White Paper on Food Safety, the general principle was that all parts of the food production chain be subject to official control (Commission of the European

Communities, 2000). Following this, based on EC regulation 882/2004 on official controls performed to verify compliance with feed and food laws and animal health and welfare rules, EU member states must ensure that official controls are carried out regularly, based on risk assessment, and with appropriate frequency. Furthermore, EC regulation 854/2004 concerning official controls on products of animal origin intended for human consumption states that official controls should cover all aspects that are important for protecting public health, and where appropriate, animal health and welfare. The HACCP system is intended to be the primary risk management tool at all stages of the food chain, except in primary production.

Fulfilling all of these requirements necessitates an adequate quantity and quality of personnel, whereas organization of food control can differ depending on socioeconomic and political factors. In many countries, the

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responsibility of food control is divided between state and local authorities, while e.g. in Denmark all official food control is state-governed (Wong, Andersen, Norrung, & Wegener, 2004). In Finland, the state is responsible for supplying basic financing for food control at the ministry, central administration and provincial levels. Municipal food control is financed mainly by the municipalities, and only a very small portion of resources is based on state funding. This has created the situation where legislation and demands are mainly set by the state, but most of the work is done by municipal resources and therefore depends on financial and other decisions made in each individual municipality. Other examples of basic services defined by state but provided mainly by municipalities in Finland are health care, social welfare, education services and cultural services (Moisio, 2002).

Finnish municipalities have a strong formal autonomy based on the Constitution. This independence includes the right of taxation, the main source of finance. The highest municipal organ is the council, which makes decisions regarding municipal finances and operations and is elected every four years in free and democratic elections (Local Government Act 365/1995). The municipal board, appointed by the council, prepares the agenda for the council. The municipal board is responsible for day-to-day administration and financial management. Beneath the board are different committees representing particular lines of administration and activities. One of the municipal activities is environmental health protection, food control being an important part of it. The responsible organ regarding environmental health protection in a municipality is the respective committee, but the council can allow the committee to delegate some of its responsibilities/decision-making power to subordinate officials or to a department.

Environmental health protection is a general term defined in the Finnish legislation to refer to the health protection of the individual and his or her environment. It includes the quality and hygiene of foodstuffs, animal health and welfare, health impacts of housing and public

of environmental health protection (Aas, Andersen, Kruse, Majjala, & Nielsen, 2004), although recently also authorities from other disciplines have more often been appointed to these positions.

Since most of the funding for local food control is of municipal origin, decision-making in municipalities is an important factor for guaranteeing adequate resources to fulfil the tasks. Unfortunately, the economic crisis in Finland in the 1990s, which was four times bigger than the recession in Finland during the Great Depression of the 1930s (Kangasharju, Laakso, Loikkanen, Riihelä, & Sullström, 2001), caused problems also for the municipalities, resulting in decreasing municipal labour forces. Furthermore, the categorical grant system (allocated money given by the state to municipalities for specified purposes) was terminated in 1993, after which the direct link between expenditures and grants was removed (Moisio, 2002). This implies that even when there is information about inadequate resources, e.g. in food control in the municipalities, the possibilities of the state to allocate money to improve the situation are very limited. Since 1994, the general economic situation has started to recover, but the recovery between municipalities is clearly uneven, and labour forces in all municipal sectors have not regained their former position (Kangasharju *et al.*, 2001).

Previously, the National Food Agency (NFA), and since 1st May 2006, the Finnish Food Safety Authority Evira (Food Safety Authority Act 25/2006), was responsible for supervising and monitoring both provincial and local food control authorities. According to the evaluations conducted by NFA, resources are unevenly divided between municipalities, with an alarming shortage of food control personnel present in some Finnish municipalities. These evaluations have been based on an index classification focusing on the number of existing personnel and food control objects. An index of resources was calculated for each municipality based on actual human resources used for food control compared with the minimum need for food control resources based on the number and type of surveillance objects in the municipalities as follows:

$$\text{index} = \frac{\text{resources available}}{\sum(\text{no. of control objects} \times \text{no. of inspections} \times \text{time needed per inspection})} \quad (1)$$

areas, noise prevention, the quality of drinking and bathing water, waste management and control of chemicals, tobacco and consumer goods. Municipal authorities are responsible for implementation of environmental health protection in their area (Ministry of Social Affairs & Health, 2004). Most of the authorized municipal officials working in the area of environmental health protection are veterinarians and health inspectors (secondary education degree). A veterinarian usually serves as the director

The index is described in detail in Poutiainen-Lindfors *et al.* (2004). According to the 2002 evaluation, of the 431 municipalities, 25 had less than half of the required resources in food control staff (minor resourced group) (Poutiainen-Lindfors *et al.*, 2004). The overall position of food control resources has not improved since (Poutiainen-Lindfors, 2006), and therefore it is essential to know which factors affect inadequate resourcing to find tools to improve the situation. Furthermore, the impact of low

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