Good governance? Perceptions of accountability, transparency and effectiveness in Irish food risk governance

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A B S T R A C T

In an attempt to govern increasingly globalised, industrialised and risky food chains, food safety authorities (FSAs) have been established worldwide as part of a catalogue of food risk governance reforms undertaken in response to continuing food crises. Despite these significant shifts in governing arrangements however, little work has been conducted regarding how consumers respond to, resist and/or engage with these new governance systems in everyday, non-crisis contexts. As such, this paper explores the everyday governance of food risk from the perspective of those whose voices typically go unheard in food policymaking processes – consumers. Drawing on empirical results from focus groups conducted with publics across the Republic of Ireland, consumer perceptions, priorities and lived experiences relating to food risk governance, and the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) in particular, are explored. This analysis is couched within a normative frame of multi-scalar governance and what makes it 'good' or effective. Accordingly, the paper advances food risk policy debates through a lens of normative good food risk governance, including analysis of the perceived accountability, transparency and effectiveness of Irish food risk governing structures from a consumer perspective. Identifying limitations in current governing regimes, the paper concludes by critically reflecting on the opportunities and challenges for adopting more adaptive forms of governance in the multi-scalar and evolving policy context that typifies food risk.

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1. Introduction

Practices of eating are central to everyday life. As such, it is unsurprising that attention to its governance in academic and policy circles remains high. Indeed, much research to date addresses the variety of problems associated with the global food chain, including those of food sustainability, security and safety. A key component of much of this research concerns the governance of food risk; from perceived GM risk to chemical food contaminants and avian influenza to BSE (see, for example, Wales et al., 2006; Nerlich et al., 2009; Casey and Lawless, 2011). However, much of this work focuses on the governance of risk in moments of crisis or extreme. In addition, it often ignores the viewpoints of the ultimate beneficiaries of food regulation; consumers. Thus, while some exceptions exist that call for increased consumer inclusion in food policy arenas (for instance, see Wentholt et al., 2009; Cope et al., 2010), there has been limited attention to the governance of everyday eating in non-emergency contexts from a consumer perspective.

Symbolic of increasingly complex and globalised food chains, food risks (both real and perceived) have proliferated in recent decades as food production continues to intensify generating chemical, microbial, technological and physical food risks (Dreyer et al., 2010). A distinct need thus exists for effective, efficient and reliable food risk governing structures to protect public health, mitigate economic consequences and maintain consumer confidence. Indeed, the BSE crisis of the 1990s stimulated a host of food safety governance reforms to re-establish consumer trust. This included the implementation of more coordinated food safety legislation, private sector mechanisms for governing food safety and the establishment of food safety authorities (FSAs) Europe-wide (Devaney, 2013). Despite these significant shifts in governing arrangements however, little work has been conducted regarding how publics engage, trust and exhibit awareness of these new food risk governing structures. In particular, consumer perceptions of the accountability, transparency and effectiveness of such new structures remains understudied. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining consumer perceptions, priorities and lived experiences of food risk governance and the first FSA established in Europe, the FSAI (Food Safety Authority of Ireland).

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Established in 1999, the FSAI operates within a complex, multi-scalar web of food risk governing structures in its attempts to ensure safe food in Ireland. As a semi-state institution, it is accountable to the national Department of Health but works with a number of auxiliary bodies to carry out its everyday food safety surveillance and business inspection functions. Coordinating the staff of various state agencies through service contract arrangements, the Health Services Executive (and related environmental health officers (EHOs)), County and City Councils, The Marine Institute, The Department of Agriculture (DAFF) and The Sea Fisheries Protection Authority consequently all remain involved in governing food risk in Ireland. The FSAI also interacts with a number of other national food bodies, including Teagasc and Safefood, to research and communicate food risk. Furthermore, as an institution within the European Union, the FSAI works under, and with, a number of supranational and international organisations, including a plethora of national FSAs, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), the European Commission and the Codex Alimentarius Commission. Food risk governance in Ireland thus involves a complex set of actors, operating across scales and sectors, to ensure the safety of food produced, distributed or marketed nationally (see Fig. 1).

The FSAI serves as a useful case study for the analysis of governance performance given its established history compared to more recently established FSAs. In addition, the importance of food and agriculture in Ireland (Phelan and O'Connell, 2011) and seemingly good food reputation merits investigation as to what might be contributing to this positivity, including the potential role played by food risk governing bodies in fostering this perception.

The paper draws on results from consumer focus groups conducted as part of a wider research project that examined both expert and lay perceptions of food risk governance in Ireland. This wider research consisted of broadly qualitative techniques including documentary, website and media analyses, thirty semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from across the Irish food industry (including public, private, civil society and FSAI representatives) and eight consumer focus groups. Given the detailed analysis of stakeholder positioning in Devaney (2013) and consumer perceptions of food risk during food 'peace-time' in Devaney (2014), this paper presents a nuanced understanding of consumer food risk governance perceptions and engagement in non-crisis contexts.

Within academic literature, significant attention has been paid to critiquing public understanding of science (see, for example, Irwin and Wynne, 1996; Irwin, 2001; Stilgoe et al., 2014), understanding consumer risk perceptions (see, for instance, Slovic et al., 1981; Slovic, 1999; Frewer et al., 2002; Devaney, 2014) and contemplating the relationships between risk, expertise and institutional adaption (see, for example, Beck, 1992; Bäckstrand, 2003). Meanwhile, studies of consumption, for instance regarding willingness to pay (Grebitus et al., 2013), provide valuable information about food consumption trends, but equally are limited in their ability to explore the social complexities of trust and engagement in food governing systems. Acknowledging this foundational literature, this paper instead examines consumer considerations of the efficiency and effectiveness of food governing mechanisms in Ireland, utilising a number of 'good' governance principles (Stoker, 1998; Graham et al., 2003; UNESCAP, 2008). Given the paucity of accurate and objective measures of governance performance, the use of internationally recognised good governance principles provides benchmarks of comparison and targets to strive towards in the quest for optimum governance (Crabbé and Leroy, 2008). While pressures exist in policy circles to increase the accountability and transparency of risk governing processes, little has been written regarding existing consumer perceptions of these dimensions and how to achieve them in practice.

This paper addresses these gaps, providing qualitative depth through an exploration of consumer opinion of national food risk governance practices based on existing understandings of good governance.

The remainder of the paper is divided into five sections. The next two sections establish the conceptual and methodological backdrop of the paper. Thereafter, the paper expands upon empirical results from focus group sessions to consider the perceived accountability, transparency and effectiveness of Irish food risk governance. Consumer awareness, trust, experiences and expectations of Irish food risk governing structures are explored against this good governance backdrop. This is followed by some practical suggestions for improving future governing regimes. Finally, the concluding section details the policy implications of the paper, highlighting the need for adaptive governance approaches in dynamic food risk arenas.

2. Conceptual framing: governance and trust

Throughout the past century, a need to move beyond traditional nation state boundaries to establish transnational and global solutions to environmental problems has been emphasised. Many contemporary hazards are perceived to evade spatial and temporal boundaries including, for example, air pollution (Roberts, 2011), genetic engineering (Beck, 1992) and food risk (Wynne and Dressel, 2001). In an attempt to govern such complex issues, an intricate, and often conflicting, set of actors has emerged operating at different scales, all competing to provide solutions and influence policy. The term governance has developed as an organising framework to understand these regulatory relationships, new and old. While certainly a contested term, one of the most neutral definitions refers to governance as *"the rules and institutions for the authoritative organization of collective life"* (Donahue, 2002, p. 1). Meanwhile, Haugaard and Ryan (2007, p. 194) optimistically view governance as *"a process which has the potential to empower citizens"* though participation and consultation processes. Processes of bargaining, deliberation, negotiation and compromise-seeking thus dominate such governing regimes as actors across scales and public, private and civil society sectors seek to exercise policy influence (Papadopoulos, 2007; Roberts, 2011).

The academic literature on governance is nonetheless highly disjointed, with evident differences existing over the perceived roots of the phenomenon and diverse sectoral foci obvious (Stoker, 1998). Similarly, opinions on what constitutes good governance also vary complicating accurate and objective readings of governance performance. In general, good governance marks a shift away from corruption, inefficiency, maladministration, secrecy and red tape to incorporate concern for governance accountability, transparency, effectiveness, inclusiveness, fairness and responsiveness (Stoker, 1998; Graham et al., 2003; UNESCAP, 2008). Nonetheless, fears have emerged regarding the perceived hijacking of good governance definitions by neoliberal agendas such as those advocated by the World Bank (ANSA, 2007). It is argued that such neoliberal institutions are imposing their version of good governance on developing countries in an attempt to achieve political, governmental and market reform; opinions that are largely based on democratic societies and Western markets. Contradicting the existence of universal principles that make governance 'good', proponents of global neoliberal agendas are instead urged to recognise the local in their strategies (ANSA, 2007). This highlights the importance of conducting nationally based governance analyses, such as that presented in this paper. Moreover, Stoker (1998) warns how governance actions can also fail. Tensions between groups exist, social conflict can prevail, inadequacies in organisations can override intentions and leadership can be misinterpreted (Stoker, 1998).