

A b s t r a c t
for
1st Work in Progress Workshop

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Food safety related risk communication in Hungary

Technology has become a major driving force of modern societies, although the improved material welfare that technology has brought is not accompanied necessarily with increasing quality of life, although in mainstream perspective the apparently unstoppable process of technological innovation represents the last unquestioned, transcendent, meta-societal principle of the ‘common good’, perhaps comparable by its substance to Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ (Hennen, 1999). This phenomenon based on the belief that there is a given, positive causal relationship between technical progress and social welfare, where the former is seen as an essential requirement and guarantee for the latter.

In fact, new technologies might actually have hindered democratic practices more than facilitated them (Fischer, 1999), and in the same time we are living in a “risk society”, where dark sides of techno-industrial progress increasingly come to dominate social and political debate (Beck, 1992).

Various experiences indicated growing scepticism of citizens. Rethinking of decision-making procedures and enhancement of “democratisation of democracy” is inevitable (Giddens, 1998) in science and technology. However we meet a question of balance hereby. There are regulatory fields or decision situations where public participation could be useful and should be part of the process, while in other cases it just does not have utilization value (Fischer, 1999). Important determinant factors for the assessment of the necessity and possible outcome of a participatory scheme can be originated from the interest and motivation of the citizens, and from the alignment of the question itself. For example, questions regarding complex technical issues are probably not leading to valuable results. In other cases, where the main issue has got remarkable ethical relations, the broader participatory scheme is more often beneficial.

Well designed surveys can help in determination of the alignment of utilisation of “procedural justice” (originally by Thibaut and Walker, 1975) in certain situations. Procedural justice at the field of decision making (Joss and Brownlea, 1999) in science and technology seems to be increasingly important issue in developed countries. EUROBAROMETER surveys as well as the national surveys of several EU countries show popular demand to participation in S&T related decision-making.

Food safety has become a main issue in the EU after many food scandals (BSE, dioxin, etc.). Debate on GM food has also contributed to its controversy. However public seems to be interested and in some cases demanding for participation regarding food regulatory issues, governments often seem to be neglectful and show technocratic approach to these questions. In case of Hungary the National Food Safety Authority was established and the main rules and principles of work in this field were accepted quite easily after the EU accession (because the country already had the same view on these questions as an old-time member of Codex Alimentarius Committee). And what is more in some cases Hungary was a flagship in shaping the new regulatory regime (for instance in case of the Rapid Alert System). In spite of this (quasi) development, no real changes could be perceived in terms of public participation. Therefore the three distinct but closely connected areas of food safety control (Risk Assessment, Risk Management and Risk Communication) seem to be having a gap in Hungary. The presentation will try to build up some kind of theoretical solution (with practical outlooks) for this situation, based on primary and secondary experiences, as well as international context.

Selected literature

Beck, Ulrich (1992): Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity, London: Sage

EUROBAROMETER Survey Series: europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/standard_en.htm

Fischer, Frank (1999): Technological deliberation in a democratic society: the case for participatory inquiry, Science and Public Policy 26(5)

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Thibaut, J., and Walker, L. (1975). Procedural Justice: A psychological Analysis, Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ.