
Food from the Risk Factory—Recurrent Problems of the European Food Safety System

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Abstract

Food safety has gained enormous importance in the European Union since the massive shock of BSE that resulted in an extensive reorganisation of the structure behind controlling risk. This study attempts to evaluate European achievements in the field from the viewpoint of a newly integrated country, Hungary, and to generalize local experiences of food scares, aiming at the description of the possible mechanism that causes these recurrent problems. Considering the factors of this mechanism with the identification of media as an active contributor in constructing food scares would appear to offer ways to refine the integrated control system.

Introduction—how food safety became a cover page story

Food safety has become a popular issue in the media since the early 1990s. Although food additives and preservatives, as well as chemical residues have a longer history in media communications, the first real shock regarding food safety was BSE (Bovine spongiform encephalopathy). It has attracted wide attention primarily because of its apparent transmissibility and lethal consequences for humans, as well as for the nature of the mental decay it causes. The human variant of the disease is called vCJD (variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease), and has presented all the features needed for being a media hype.

- It originated in the animal husbandry practice of industrialized farms, where cows had been fed animal proteins (including processed cattle carcasses) to reduce costs. This practice has been described in the media

as ‘unnatural’, or by the phrase of ‘indirect cannibalism’, suggesting that there is something ‘sinister’ happening around us.

- The disease appeared transmissible to humans, although it took a long time to be recognized and admitted by the government of the United Kingdom, where the first vCJD patients appeared. It can be explained either by the long experiment times, derived from the incubation time of the disease, or the concern of ruining the cattle sector economically by a wrong preliminary attitude (and other ‘conspiracy theories’). The Southwood Working Party, which was set up to advise on the implications of BSE in the UK, concluded that the risk of transmission of BSE to humans appeared remote and stated ‘it is most unlikely that BSE would have any implications for human health’ (Southwood Working Party 1989). In May 1990 a domestic cat was diagnosed as suffering from a ‘scrapie-like’ spongiform encephalopathy. This generated widespread public and media concern that if BSE could be transmitted to cats, then it might also be transmissible to humans. Subsequently, more domestic cats were similarly diagnosed. These events shifted the perception of some scientists of the likelihood that BSE might be transmissible to humans. By 1994 the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) evaluated the risk of transmissibility to humans as remote only because precautionary measures had been put in place (Phillips 2000). The years of delay between the two announcements have also raised concerns and contributed to the mist of malevolence this disease has been surrounded by, and profoundly rocked public confidence in science and its governmental applications.
- The serious mental decay associated with the disease was a news-worthy story for the press and made it very easy to draw public attention. Detailed reports on the process of the disease were evidently part of the news, since they were exactly the type of story—rich in images, subsidiary plots and tragic outcomes—that sells papers. Cases like the story of one of the first victims were widely published and discussed:

In the space of just six months, [subject] was reduced to a wreck of a human being who could not control her movements, cowered in fear from members of her own family and howled at night like an injured animal. She began to lose

weight, became increasingly depressed to the point where she was crying for no reason [...] her ability to walk began to suffer and she started falling over and complaining of dizziness [...] her handwriting [...] deteriorated into an indecipherable scrawl [...] She became frail and fragile, displaying 'childlike' behaviour, and developed a nervous laugh. [...] Her hands started to turn inwards. Her feet started to turn inwards also. She became completely knock-kneed. Her hips would become disjointed. If this occurred she couldn't walk unaided. [...] She walked in a thoroughly uncoordinated fashion and cried constantly. [...] The most harrowing thing was when she was in bed and would howl like an injured animal. She looked at you as if you were the devil incarnate (BBC 2000).

- The long incubation time, which made recognition of vCJD difficult, has also provided the hype with extra ammunition. One of the patients who died of vCJD had been a vegetarian for 13 years, when her health state suddenly started to deteriorate. Many scientific and yellow press media carried reports of the number of CJD victims to be expected over the next decades. Some of them (Daily Telegraph 1997) reported shockingly large numbers (80–100 thousand human victims). They argued that considering the very long incubation time, we were possibly standing only at the brink of a huge epidemic (Cousens et al. 1997). Assumptions became extremely pessimistic after the public realized that a broad variety of products (many types of food, cosmetics and medicinal products) contain bovine derivatives: 'no one is safe'. Another concern was raised by blood transfusions, which would become unsafe in case CJD could transmit from human to human.

Considering all the conjugated factors of the BSE food scare (false governmental actions, dishonourable profit interests, mistakes of science, conspiracy theories, lethality to humans, morbidity of symptoms, long incubation time, great number of possible victims, unavoidable exposure), it must be admitted that the media hype proceeded with a uniquely sound base.

Well described consequences of this food scare include serious economic losses, decreased consumer confidence in democratic institutions and science, major changes in the organizational structures and policies both at EU and national levels. There is another consequence, which has been less emphasized, but nonetheless is very important: the recognition

of food scares as valuable news, which media can sell. BSE proved its value in providing front page stories for years, and a readership in distant countries was as interested in following the new developments as that in the directly affected states. Another effect was that some journalists acquired expertise in this field during the years of the BSE scare, and have since been willing to use these skills.

Looking at our observations concerning BSE, we can see that food scares in general share most of the factors involved. Eating food always was and will be a matter of confidence, as the appearance and taste of our meal does not let us judge the quality nor the safety of the product, except where its condition is quite obviously very bad. This confidence can be guaranteed by the producer, the retailer, the government and other third party institutions. All the actors involved clearly have some responsibilities, although to different extents. During food scares and scandals, consumers (and the media) can always find one or more of these parties liable (dishonourable profit interests, false governmental actions, mistakes of science and conspiracy theories). Another parallelism between BSE and food scares in general is that some of the contaminants do not affect the subject's health immediately, but only after a period of accumulation, which is similar to the incubation time of BSE. While lethal and morbid symptoms are not very common results of a general food safety breach, the exposure of the population is usually very extensive, while the potential number of affected people can often be immeasurable.

The Eastern Block moves West

Although the current state of food safety in Hungary is determined by several different factors, we may find only a couple of determinants when concentrating on the changes that it has gone through during the past decade. The two most significant factors were without doubt Hungary's accession to the EU and the introduction of liberalized *free* trade (Bánáti 1998). Reviewing the common expectations (Lakner et al. 1999; Lakner & Hajdu 2002; Csáth 2004), we might be able to single out some of the most typical ones:

- Being part of an economically competitive integration and enjoying its benefits: stable macro economic background, sound growth, effective coordination in the fields of production and trade, expanding export opportunities and improving domestic markets.
- Fair redistribution of common revenues to less developed countries. ‘Following the Irish model’ was a popular political slogan in the years of convergence. Evidently Hungary hoped (and was promised) to receive more from the common budget than it was going to pay.
- Acquiring a fashionable lifestyle—leaving behind the depressing shadow of socialism, and becoming a ‘Western country’. People were often living through existential crises and felt their situation particularly painfully when they compared it with the situation of the rich Western societies.

In addition to the positive expectations, concerns were also voiced (it would be extraordinary if this were not the case: Hungary has the reputation of being the most pessimistic nation in the world):

- Becoming a colony of rich Western countries, which would exploit the cheap workforce and natural resources of Hungary.
- Losing national independence once more (Hungary suffered from 150 years of Ottoman occupation; annexation to the Habsburg Empire from the 16th century till 1867; 40 years of communism under the supremacy of the Soviet Union).
- Sacrificing national values, like special meals and food (the media often referred to poppy seed dumplings for instance, and some ‘experts’ argued that the ‘rigorous’ EU food safety and quality standards would mean the end of traditional Hungarian food production).
- In terms of food safety, experts warned that implementation of EU legislation in Hungarian regulations would mean jettisoning of some important control points, as well as loosening general standards.

At the present time, two years after Hungary’s accession, a snapshot of the EU integration process might present a sobering picture:

- Growing EU scepticism and refusal have accompanied the integration process (controversial referendums on the new EU Constitution, disagreement among EU countries on the question of further enlargement of the Union).
- The European Union seemingly cannot compete with the United States; the waking ‘sleeping giant’ (China), and the ‘little tigers’ (Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea) that are fast growing up also pose a gradually increasing threat to export and domestic markets of the Union.
- Some of the founding members of the EU are suffering from recession (especially Germany, the largest net contributor to the EU budget).
- The future of the Monetary Union is uncertain. Present Euro Zone countries are breaking their own criteria consistently, and the United Kingdom, one of the most prosperous countries of the EU, refused to swap the pound for the euro (and not for the first time), while other member countries, such as Italy, placed leaving the Euro Zone into consideration as a real possibility.
- Ultimately, from the viewpoint of Hungary as well as other new member countries, we had to recognize that the ‘Irish model’ remains a dream, with no chance of implementation. EU integration is faced with profound structural problems; new members have to deal with their problems on their own.

Brave new food safety

Nevertheless, liberalized trade and changes in the regulatory conditions had a remarkable impact on food safety. Speaking about globalization, we may easily find pros and cons (Chikán & Demeter 2003), and discover that favouritism on either side is hard to avoid. In spite of this, it is important to make an effort to judge the role it plays in shaping national socio-economic changes and to make conclusions even though the endeavour is made to retain restraint and to stick to factual dissections, leaving the less precisely measurable factors out of consideration. As Chikán argues,

globalization is a process aiming at the optimal exploitation of available resources, and the deconstruction of barriers along this path in geographical, political, cultural, and economic dimensions. While it is not a panacea, it is not a threatening monster either: this process is a natural phenomenon, deriving from the development of economy. Therefore, regardless of one's personal preferences, considering its mechanisms is unavoidable when analysing socio-economic models (Chikán 2002). Focusing on food safety, we may make the following observations:

The dawn of globalisation in Hungary started with the transition in its political system. It is rumoured that the system transition *itself* also was a consequence of increasing globalization, with some lobbies receiving support from international or US organizations, although these rumours have not been confirmed. Some fields (such as the monetary sector) faced the brunt of globalization earlier than others. During the process of *privatization* of state owned factories, farms, companies and other properties (which was primarily meant to compensate those families that lost their possessions or suffered human tragedies during the years of communism) and the reorganization, which followed this period, 80–90% of the food industry was bought up by international investors. Staying with numerical terms, Hungary received the highest amount of direct investment per capita (Antalóczy & Sass 2002). As EU accession came closer, more multinational companies arrived in Hungary, creating fierce competition in both the production and the retail sectors. Imported food products accounted for a gradually increasing share of consumption. At the same time, people still expressed their preference for Hungarian products over imported goods, and were concerned about the quality and safety of food of foreign origin, but the decreased purchasing power of wages restrained their consumer consciousness (Bánáti & Lakner 2002; Bánáti et al. 2003). Meanwhile, traditional farmers' markets and especially small shops lost in the price war with super- and hypermarket chains, and thus lost importance.

Regarding food safety, liberalization of trade produced some controversial results. Interviews with leading food safety experts and top governmental officers reveal a coherent opinion as a summary of the changes in the past years. 'Hungary had to ease the rigor of its food safety regulations'. While standards were loosened for the sake of free

trading, serious barriers emerged for small producers and shops. All companies dealing with food were obliged to set up a food safety assurance system, which needed huge amounts of investment so that many of them had to close their doors permanently. Only the biggest companies could introduce these control systems without insurmountable financial difficulties.

Another important issue affecting the general view on food risks in Hungary is that food safety inspections at the border of any two member countries had to end in accordance with multilateral agreements; the inspections are now limited only to food transports between member and non-member countries. Quite a few experts are concerned about the inspection and evaluation procedures of some of the member countries, and think they do not meet Hungary's expectations when allowing products to enter the territory of the European Union. 'Our hands are tied when food products are arriving in our country from these places', as one of them put it. 'We could carry out only random inspections; this is all EU law permits us to do, although these random inspections are very often *positive*, unfortunately. And the problematic shipments are usually tracked down too late: on the shelves of shops, partly consumed'. 'I suppose, we see only the tip of the iceberg', added one of the interviewees.

Food from the risk factory

No argument can persist without examples, and unfortunately we have plenty of them regarding our subject. Most of these draw broad media attention and are well documented in the archives. The interviewees speaking about these cases agreed that many more examples might have been found had the former inspection procedures still existed. Here we can present only a selection of the most typical cases from the past two years, which are probably very similar to other European countries' findings.

- Unlaid eggs from the Netherlands. These eggs bore future production date stamps. The science fiction sense was enhanced by a special ('Mad Maxian') way of transportation: in trucks loaded with vegetables (which is regrettably a regular practice in egg transportation from

the Netherlands to Hungary). Probably the owner of the cargo expected a longer transportation time and wanted to do something about it to be able to sell eggs as fresh.

- Paprika scandal in Hungary. In this case Hungarian red paprika processors (powder producers) mixed chilli pepper to Hungarian paprika, and went on selling it as an authentic, traditional and unique Hungarian product (*Hungaricum*). The practice of mixing cheap chilli to Hungarian paprika *outside* of Hungary has a long history. The world famous Hungarian paprika *brand* sold these low quality products quite well, and the Hungarian producers shut their eyes to the problem, since there was enough—although decreasing—demand for their own output. The real problem started when multinational corporations started to challenge Hungarian producers' prices, pushing them below the limit of sustainability. They could do that: at that time, internationally sold 'Hungarian' paprika had become already a decreased quality product, and other chilli paprikas also performed quite well under the traditional label. Therefore, the producers stepped into the snare that they had helped to set up. At this point, it seemed to be an easy solution to mix Hungarian paprika with cheap powders at the very start of the production chain. It was not going to be illegal, provided that the label mirrored the factual changes, which was not the case. This, however, was merely a minor addition to the scandal. The main issue was that inspections revealed that some of the paprika powder produced in Hungary was contaminated with mycotoxins. Later examination indicated that the aflatoxin found in ground paprika was produced by a species that lived exclusively in tropical climates. Official investigations revealed the widespread existence of the mixing practice, and that some of the producers probably knew that one of the raw materials (chilli paprika produced in Brazil, imported to Spain, from where it was exported to Hungary) was contaminated. They further found that it was almost certain that these companies made efforts to mix Hungarian paprika up to—but not above—the official threshold limit, an aim that was apparently not successfully achieved. The lawsuits initiated against these companies are still in progress. A second dimension of analysis regarding this scandal could concern the long

delay between the first signs of the problem and the official investigation. A member of the Hungarian parliament questioned the former Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development on paprika imports from South America in September 2003, a year before the scandal brought to public attention. Using an economic approach, the MP accused imports of fragmentizing the integrated Hungarian paprika production systems. The minister did not see any cause for anxiety in his response, and denied that paprika was being imported from South America at all (Lakner et al. 2005). In September 2004 a random inspection revealed a mycotoxin content in a ground pepper shipment from Peru. Companies involved in the import transaction admitted that they were going to mix it with Hungarian paprika to enhance the colour of certain products, but denied the intention of putting foreign paprika into traditional paprika powders. A month later, a report was received from Slovenia, where mycotoxin contamination was detected in Hungarian paprika powder. Over two weeks passed until a ban on certain paprika products was issued in Hungary and a nationwide inspection began. This long delay is not acceptable in a professional system whose task it is to prevent damage to the health of consumers. The case resulted in some personal consequences (at least two), although government did not confirm connections between the liability in the paprika case and the forced resignation of some of the leading officers. One of these officers sat on a management board of one of the accused companies, a conflict of interest with his governmental position.

- The third dimension of our analysis, in this case, should take place at the level of European integration. The so-called Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed was founded in 2002, to serve as a high priority communication channel throughout the European Union and associated countries. In the event of problematic food products being identified in one of the countries, all relevant information will be available for the whole community, serving the localization of food borne risks. In one respect this worked relatively well, when Slovenia submitted a report about the problematic Hungarian ground paprika product. On the other hand, we may find incoherencies, for instance in the case

of Germany, where officers appeared to have been warned by Hungarian journalists who questioned them about Germany's possible reactions (Magyar Rádió 2004). As a final remark to this case, we might add that Spanish authorities, which allowed Brazilian paprika into EU territory, could not be considered legally liable, as current EU legislation (in contrast to the former Hungarian food law) did not require chilli products to be tested for mycotoxins. After the paprika case, a Hungarian recommendation proposed amendments to the EU regulation and additional testing on EU borders for this kind of goods, which was accepted.

- Only weeks after the paprika scandal, we observed another food scare. Fresh paprika imported from Morocco was found to contain chemical residues with concentrations far exceeding the legally accepted threshold. In this case there was a ten day delay between the first positive random inspection and the ban of the product. The official explanation for the delay was that the authority was afraid of being sued had they not been able to prove the product to be contaminated with 100% certainty. In these ten days a considerable share of the product was sold and consumed. While we may feel that these naked facts could prevail without comment of any kind, we should point out the tendency of delays as crucial factors contributing to food scares.
- Frozen chicken found to be contaminated with salmonella twice in a single supermarket chain. Adding to the piquancy of this case is that the two shipments were very likely the same *one*. The first detection occurred in the central storage facility of the multinational group, whereupon the officer of the authority ordered the entire shipment to be destroyed. A few days later another random inspection was carried out in a local branch of the chain, where they found an identical chicken shipment, also contaminated with salmonella, in an illegal storage facility. Although we cannot state that the chain was going to sell this shipment to its customers, it would be difficult to believe the explanation of the manager of the company, that they had intended to destroy the condemned product, and that is why it was put into a *separate* storage.

- A recent issue: waste material (declared as dog and cat food raw material) from meat processing plants arrived in Hungary from Germany (other destination countries were: Austria, France, Italy, Lithuania, Poland and Switzerland). This material (animal intestines, brain, eyes, bones, waste pulp) was not considered to pose a risk to consumers' health, although it was regarded as 'highly disgusting' (Menedzsment Fórum 2005; Origo 2005). The waste was processed to meat products as fillings, and spreads. At the time authorities noticed that this had happened, the products had already been sold and (probably) consumed. Some of the interviews revealed that this process is far from being unique. Meat processors often buy (and sometimes even bid for) these wastes. A comparison of prices for certain meat products (frankfurters, parizer, etc.) and prices for raw meat produces a controversial result, which cannot be explained in any other way. Another example for the recycling of waste or degraded animal products is the transportation of half cut frozen pigs, outside the period defined for human consumption, from the Netherlands to Hungary. This kind of meat, which is regarded as animal (dog and cat) feed in the country of origin, is sold for human consumption purposes to Hungarian meat processors, earning an extra profit margin for the trader. The interviewees agreed that meat processors make every effort to cover each other's back, making data gathering about these practices almost impossible. Official action is thus very difficult to take. If we add a certain level of corruption to the picture (as was probably also the case in the paprika scandal), we may understand the argument, but must not accept the practice.
- Pseudo flour from Slovakia: extremely bad quality flour dumped onto the Hungarian market. By the time the inspections were finished, all the stocks had been purchased by consumers. The flour does not pose a risk to human health, but is useless in fulfilling its original nutritional function, and it strongly contributed to decreasing the negotiating power of Hungarian mills (Világgazdaság 2005).
- Genetically modified (GM) food products present a special field of food safety, because so far no scientific data has proven them to be either safe or dangerous. The EU decided (under pressure of WTO) to allow these products to be sold in the territory of the Union, provided

they are labelled appropriately. This process is designed to give consumers freedom of choice. Even this status of GM food products has been strongly criticised (Bánáti & Kasza 2003; Lakner & Kasza 2005), while statistics show that *very likely* not all the products containing GM ingredients are labelled accordingly. The most relevant source of GM material is soybean and its derivatives, imported mainly from the US and South America (primarily Argentina). In these countries 85–90% of the soy bean produced is genetically modified. Greenpeace has made efforts to *find out* what is happening with the shipments on the long route from America to Europe (biggest soy importer of the world) that causes GM soy to transform into non-GM, without significant success. An interviewee working in animal (pig) husbandry reported that they order feed from a list that contains both GM and non-GM soy, but he—along with his colleagues at other farms—is forced, for economic reasons, to order the GM type, because of the huge difference in prices. Meat processors and bakeries probably work the same way, because the use of soy meal, which is extensively used for cost reduction in these sectors, has no impacts on labelling—another great opportunity to analyse gaps between principles and practice.

We have reviewed several products from the *risk factory* and made it clear that we are probably seeing *only the tip of the iceberg*. Although it is important to record the cases, understanding the underlying mechanism would be even more crucial. In the following section we will try to use a systematic approach to outline this mechanism.

The increasing dominance of super- and especially hypermarkets results in a strong concentration of capital in the retail sector, which is unmatched by the concentration level in raw material and food production and gives the retail sector a disproportionate negotiation power (Nagy 2004). Hypermarket and supermarket chains, which dominate retail trade, are typically multinational companies with interests and specialized market knowledge in several countries. This gives them an advantage in price negotiations with local producers. If they do not receive the expected price in a region, they make producers of other regions join the tender. The retail companies' own brands also support competition by allowing

the hyper- or supermarket to swap producers behind the cover of the retail brand if a better deal is found. They can also use several other techniques, like price dumping to eliminate less potent competitors and further influence local producers. A description of this situation would not be complete if we did not mention the fierce competition that these multinationals are engaged in with each other. One of the most important fields of this battle is organized around prices, and this tension is transmitted to the negotiations between retailers and producers.

Low prices evidently require low production costs in the long run; therefore companies dealing with food production will use every tool available to reduce expenditure. Most food additives and protein substitutes (mainly soy derivatives) have been developed solely for this purpose. We could assume that it is a natural process, that the strong price competition they are put in by multinationals results in quality degradation, which will—after falling below a certain level—also result in safety problems (Gille 2005). This process is enhanced by the diminishing product responsibility of companies, whose employees (and owners) will probably never meet the consumers of their products. This is especially true for foreign producers and producers of retail brand goods, who are not directly present and recognizable in the products sold.

Food safety assurance systems like HACCP and the ISO series could be important tools, but without strict control, they are often useless. As one of the interviewees put it, *paper is patient*, and these control systems would never be able to compensate for the *human factor* effectively.

Conclusions and path finding

It is evident that the mechanism we tried to model is not directly favourable for all the consumers, although most of them enjoy the benefits of price competition. Deriving from the mechanism, premium and middle priced products tend to bear ‘normal’ (e.g. unavoidable) risk, but safety seems to be an unstable characteristic once a certain price level is undercut, which is exactly the situation we wish to avoid. Our reasons are clear: we could not accept a situation where *along with the lower price, the consumer buys a certain*

amount of risk too, although this represents the natural law of economics. It is evidently against human rights, as well as WHO and EU declarations on food safety, which agree that all human beings have a right to safe food.

Analysing the points where we could interfere in the above mechanism, we may see some opportunities:

Strict controls and more inspections. It would seem to be a good solution to re-introduce the former inspection system, and not allow food into the domestic markets without case-by-case inspections. Unfortunately, Hungary had to resign from this right for good upon entering the EU for the sake of the *free circulation of goods*. Another possibility would be to raise the frequency of random inspections. Certainly, this also has limitations and could backfire: other member countries could consider it as blocking of free trade within the Union.

Promote food safety culture all over the EU, and especially in those countries from which we most frequently receive problematic products. This seems to be a good method, and this is what is currently happening at EU level. Hopefully it will prevail, although we might question that some countries, which profit nicely from serving as the biggest ports of the EU, would risk their privileged status and introduce stricter processes for the entry of imported goods. We could have the same concerns regarding countries with dominantly export oriented agricultural and food production sectors: it is most unlikely that any of them would restrain themselves above a basic limit in terms of export opportunities.

Building of consumer consciousness. Although we cannot avoid considering the effect that multinationals have on national economies, ultimately it is not their activities, but the consumers themselves who define the future shape of local marketplaces. Consumers vote with their money, as the marketing axiom says, which is very relevant considering our field. It sounds simple to make consumers understand that, for the sake of their health, it would be important to evaluate other product details besides price. It would also be necessary that they adjust their preferences according to the reliability of the producers and retail chains, and do not feel tempted by new and new *special offers*. Nevertheless, it would be idealistic to expect that these fundamentally clear and reasonable ideas could grow roots easily in consumers' attitudes. The billions spent on high-tech marketing

and PR cannot be matched by any governmental action in the short term. The relatively low average purchasing power of Hungarians also explains the persistence of the present system. A major proportion of consumers appear to be ready to pay for low prices with an increased risk. The purchasing power of wages cannot be influenced by professional policy and should thus be considered as a given factor in our model. We must still make every effort, despite the difficult components in the task, to influence consumer attitudes in the right direction.

In this sense, the somewhat technocratic approach of authorities should be pivotally changed: the focus should be shifted from communicating *to* people to communicating *with* people. It would be favourable to organize a Board for Communication on Food Safety, including delegates from professional institutes and authorities in the field. Experts of this Board should react to public questions, expectations and reports (including unique questions and reports). Regular evaluation of public knowledge in critical fields and other important issues is needed, and decisions about consumer surveys and information campaigns have to be made if necessary. The Board would also serve as a consulting body to the government in policy making.

The media ought to be one of the most important partners of this Board. According to current practice, especially in cases of food scares, the media seem to be asking the experts on a random basis (probably determined by past experience of journalists about the availability and cooperativeness of their interview partners). This has frequently led to controversial results, which instead of helping the orientation of people during food scares, made the situation even worse. The Board should understand and consider the main working principles of the media and qualify itself as the first and most reliable information source for journalists. Besides providing information upon request, it should use a proactive approach as well: user friendly, periodical reports should be sent to journalists, along with topical messages based on consumer surveys and the experience of multilateral communication. During times of food scares, the Board should make every effort to follow the events and report them to the public in a form that is accurate and still understandable even to lay persons. The communications should also follow up the cases, and help accountability and transparency.

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