

Consumer perception of food-borne risks

Joachim Scholderer

MAPP, The Aarhus School of Business, Haslegaardsvej 10, DK-8210 Aarhus V, Denmark. Tel.: +45 89 486 487. Fax: +45 86 150 177. E-mail: joachim.scholderer@asb.dk. WWW: <http://www.mapp.asb.dk>.

Consumers make numerous judgements of food safety on a daily basis. Where microbiological or chemical risks are concerned, the presence or absence of a hazardous agent is generally not perceptible. In such a situation, consumers have to rely on indirect cues in their judgements of food safety. These cues can be sensory experiences that consumers believe to be indicative of safety or harm (like the looks, smell, texture, or taste of a product). Alternatively, consumers may hold deeply rooted attitudes towards particular farming systems or technologies that were involved in the manufacturing and processing of a food (genetic modification, food irradiation). Finally, consumers may base their judgements on external information gathered through face-to-face communication or the media, depending on the perceived trustworthiness of the information source, the food industry in general, or the regulatory system. Research is reviewed as to the influence of these different factors on consumer perceptions of food safety, both before purchase (store and product choice) and after purchase (transportation, storage and meal preparation in the household). It is concluded that, under normal circumstances, consumers' judgements of food safety remain implicit and are largely based on heuristics (eg, highly processed = unsafe, organic = safe). Most consumers seem to be aware of correct food handling practices in the household, but systematically discount the importance of such practices when their own behaviour is concerned. Crisis situations like food scares, on the other hand, appear to trigger explicit judgements of food safety. However, these judgements are still driven by heuristics and therefore prone to certain biases. New forms of communication are needed that can specifically address misrepresentation of food safety issues in consumers. Consumer organisations are perceived to be the most trustworthy actors in the food chain and should therefore take a leading role in such communications.