

Stakeholder participation in the management and communication of food chain risks

A Rural Economy and Land Use Programme research project investigating the extent to which stakeholder participation can improve the management and communication of risks associated with the food chain.



Policy and Practice Notes

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The Rural Economy and Land Use Programme is a UK-wide research programme carrying out interdisciplinary research on the multiple challenges facing rural areas. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council and the Natural Environment Research Council, with additional funding from the Scottish Government and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

The handling of food safety related issues in the UK has often been found wanting in the past. Authorities have sometimes taken too technical a perspective, and the social, political and economic issues have been addressed too late in the process. This can result in stakeholders becoming alienated and losing confidence in the management of the situation. This project aimed to design and evaluate decision support tools and processes for participatory risk management and communication, which ensure that the views and values of all stakeholders are fully integrated into the management process.

Who are stakeholders in food risks?

Stakeholders are individuals, groups or organisations with interests in a particular issue or problem.

- Different stakeholders are likely to think quite differently about food risks, depending on their knowledge (based on science or everyday experience), how the risk and actions to manage it affect them or their interests, as well as a range of social and cultural factors.
- Stakeholders' understandings of what 'risk' actually means are likely to be divergent. These differences determine how they make sense of the issues, their concerns and worries about the situation, and the actions they believe should be taken to manage food risks.
- There needs to be wide consultation, therefore, to identify stakeholders. Simply relying on those managing the risks to identify stakeholders may well overlook some of those who feel affected.

What is participation?

Participation is the general term used to describe the involvement of stakeholders in societal decisions, such as those surrounding food risk management. It is different from traditional consultation in that it requires an open dialogue between risk managers and stakeholders in such activities as defining the issues, values and uncertainties that are considered. In some cases it may include sharing responsibility for the decisions taken.

- Participation can be implemented via a range of methods that involve stakeholders in different ways, for example multi-disciplinary workshops, citizens' juries and online discussions. Each method employs different processes and levels of commitment from stakeholders.
- Participation necessarily requires that participants are open to alternative views, including those derived from non-scientific sources, for example personal experience.

Why involve stakeholders?

Stakeholder involvement increases the range of relevant issues and concerns taken into account in risk management and communication. This makes how the problem is defined and the actions taken to mitigate it more widely acceptable.

- Failing to take account of stakeholder views, expectations and reactions can seriously impair the effectiveness of risk management and communication strategies. Stakeholders may perceive the agencies responsible for managing food risks as irrelevant, and think that they are failing to address the key issues.
- Lack of involvement may also lead stakeholders to lose trust in the ability of agencies to regulate and control food risk now and in the future.

How should we involve stakeholders in the process?

There are many methods of participation but a lack of systematic research comparing them makes it difficult to determine the best method for any particular situation. Thus, careful thought needs to be given about which stakeholders should be involved and when and how to involve them.

Agencies should:

- Clearly define the objectives for participation and use these to guide how the process is designed and executed.
- Systematically consider all known stakeholders and decide which ones to invite to participate.
- Document those they exclude and those that decline.
- Consider all parts of the process (problem definition, risk assessment, decision-making) and decide which to involve stakeholders in.
- Decide which of the available methods for participation is most likely to achieve the objectives. Stakeholders may have difficulty in articulating fully their understanding of food chain risks and the actions needed to mitigate them.
- Document and justify methodological choices to make them transparent and enable others to judge the appropriateness of the approach and the robustness of the outcome.

What are the benefits of participation?

Stakeholders bring a wider range of perspectives and lay knowledge to the process. It is hard to evaluate the effects of this experimentally, though there are several reasons why participation may be beneficial.

Participation can:

- Improve the identification and prioritisation of stakeholder concerns, and hence the formulation of issues under assessment.
- Enable risk assessment to address the issues of concern to stakeholders, and to make use of lay knowledge where appropriate.
- Enable the evaluation and decision-making phase to take better account of stakeholder concerns and values, and thus achieve more representative and acceptable action.
- Increase the credibility of the whole process with the wider stakeholder community.
- Reduce the 'democratic deficit' (a lack of public involvement in societal decision making).

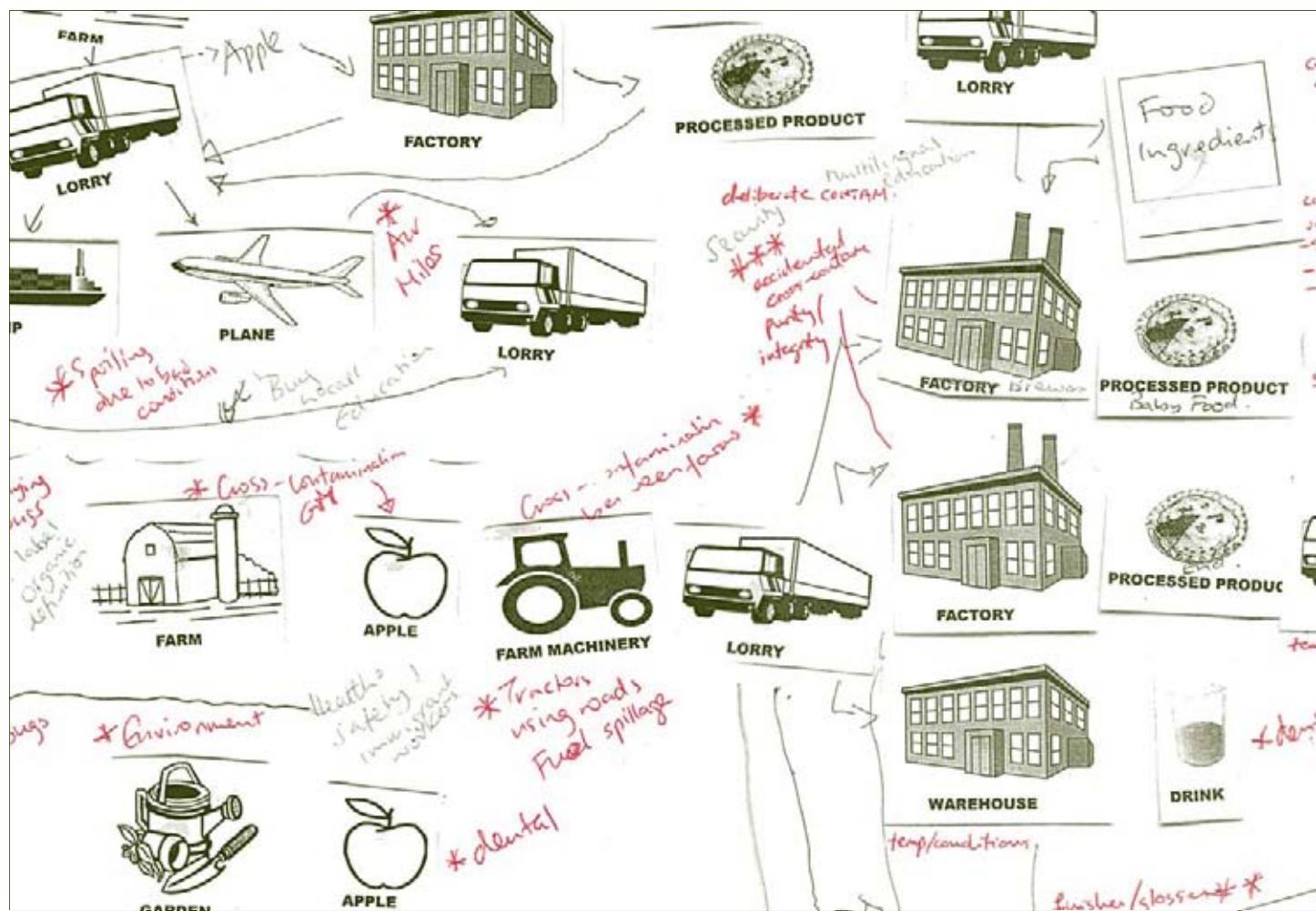
What are the drawbacks of participation?

The research has identified some problems:

- Recruiting stakeholders can be difficult, especially when events are spread over several days, run at some distance from their work/home, or run too frequently.
- Repeatedly involving the same stakeholders can lead to 'stakeholder fatigue'.
- Variability within stakeholder groups makes it difficult to ensure their views are adequately represented by those who participate.
- Participatory processes take more time than conventional risk assessments, have to be conducted with less technical language, and may dwell on aspects of the problem that technical specialists (rightly or wrongly) consider unimportant.
- Open styles of participation are good for airing diverse opinions, but can be less effective in arriving at well-defined questions for scientific risk assessment.
- Sometimes it is not possible to establish a consensus, especially when stakeholder views are very divergent.

Is stakeholder participation always a good thing?

- The balance of pros and cons differ according to the phase of the risk analysis process. The benefits of widespread stakeholder engagement tend to be most evident at the problem-definition and evaluation phases, whereas disadvantages loom much larger at the assessment phase (except in situations when stakeholders are also acting as experts).
- The advantages of participation may be achieved without involving stakeholders in every single assessment process. Many assessments are broadly similar and follow standard procedures, and so if there is good participation when the procedures are developed, participation in later cases can become superfluous.
- Achieving useful participation in crises is a challenge, owing to the limited amount of time available to arrange and analyse stakeholder contributions.
- Each stage of a participatory process needs to include both free-ranging discussion (to air alternative views) and more structured discussion (to seek a consensus).
- If there is no consensus, the process should aim to characterise and assess alternative formulations of the problem.
- To maximise trust and credibility, all of the risk management process, including the setting of objectives, choice of stakeholders and extent and nature of participation, should be transparent, documented and open to independent review.



Researchers have developed an innovative procedure to facilitate participation: the 'fuzzy felt'. Stakeholders, either individually or in groups, construct their understanding of the food chain by placing icons of key elements (e.g. farms, processing plants, lorries, and home refrigerators) on a blank page, connect them up to represent the order in which they operate, and then write in the type and location of key risks and ways in which these should be mitigated. The results of a group discussion are illustrated here. The project has also developed a web-based version that allows individuals to construct and submit a model electronically.

Further information

This research has been carried out at the universities of Surrey, Manchester and Leeds, the Institute of Food Research and the Central Science Laboratory.

Key contact:

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Useful resources:

Shepherd, R. (2008). Involving the public and stakeholders in the evaluation of food risks. *Trends in Food Science and Technology*, 19, 234-239.

Shepherd, R., Barker, G., French, S., Hart, A., Maule, J., & Cassidy, A. (2006). Managing food chain risks: integrating technical and stakeholder perspectives on uncertainty. *Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 57, 311-327.

Project website:

www.relu-risk.org.uk

Food Standards Agency websites:

www.food.gov.uk/

www.foodbase.org.uk/

