



Do you trust your food?

(TRUSTINFOOD)

Levels of consumer trust in food vary considerably across Europe. Some differences can be explained by the absence or presence of food scandals, but the seriousness of such scandals does not seem to correlate with measured levels of consumer trust. The TRUSTINFOOD project was a multidisciplinary study to better understand and analyse the factors that determine trust in the food supply and promote new strategies to support it. At national level a wide variation in attitudes was found. The degree of trust and distrust appears to be influenced by national institutional arrangements, dominant actors and varying responses to problematic events.

Why trust varies

Consumer trust has become a key word in European debates and policy initiatives in relation to food. Despite a spate of recent food crises, there does not seem to be any direct link between the extent of scandals and the level of consumer distrust, which are both unevenly distributed throughout Europe. Indeed, levels of trust in food vary between EU countries. The overall aim of the TRUSTINFOOD project is to explain such variations in consumer trust.

The general assumption in this study is that trust in food is both social and relational. This means that trust has to be studied as the outcome of interrelations between consumers and the food supply system, which is also strongly influenced by the involvement of public authorities and civil society.

Consumers and institutions

On the basis of individual and institutional data, the study sought to identify and analyse factors that determine trust in the food supply and in information

sources. Representative population surveys were conducted with a total of 8 870 computer-assisted telephone interviews in six European countries: Denmark, Germany, Italy, Norway, Portugal and the United Kingdom. The selected countries provided a representative picture of European states, varying in size and geography.

Institutional pre-conditions were studied in the same six countries, as were EU policies and institutions at the European level. This part of the project concentrated on three major sets of actors: market actors (farmers, the processing industry, retailers); public authorities and consumers. In addition, other actors, such as food experts, NGOs and the media were also covered. Two special food case-studies were considered on the topics of beef and tomatoes. The two elements (survey and institutional studies) were then brought together using comparative methods to achieve a systematic analysis of the institutional bases of consumer trust and distrust in food provision across Europe. This included a critical analysis of alternative strategies for handling trust and distrust in the food system.



Key actors build trust

The results from the survey show systematic variations between the countries with regard to trust



Consumer science

in food. Italian and Portuguese respondents demonstrate the greatest uncertainty, followed by the Germans. Danish, Norwegian and British consumers show rather high levels of trust in food. There are, however, similarities between the countries with regard to the evaluation of the safety of various food items; fresh fruit and vegetables are generally ranked high, various types of meat have medium ranking, while restaurant meals and hamburgers from fast-food outlets are the subject of most concern.

People across Europe have identical ranking orders when it comes to who they believe will tell the whole truth in a model case study on a food scare involving chicken. Consumer organisations and food experts are generally ranked the most trustworthy on this measure, food authorities and the media in the middle, while market actors such as retailers, farmers and the manufacturing industry are least often believed to be truthful.

National institutional characteristics, such as the degree of transparency, predictability and independence, demonstrate highly diverse patterns. Countries with low levels of trust are characterised by controversy, fragmented responsibilities and lack of transparency in their institutions. In higher-trust countries at least one powerful institutional actor is trusted when there is a food scandal. The role of consumers is also critical for the establishment of trust relations. While consumers generally represent a rather weak party within the food systems, institutionalisation of consumer distrust (through independent parties, transparency and representation) seems to promote consumer trust.

Better understanding, positive consequences

The project has produced a multi-dimensional concept of trust that together with other analyses link diverse institutional arrangements with consumer attitudes across various countries and at the EU level. This will allow a better understanding of the consequences of EU and national policy initiatives. In addition, the project has established a dialogue with

European consumer organisations on consumer policy strategies and with food authorities at national and European levels that will be useful for future consultation exercises.

Although the project confirmed that distrust can be negative, it also demonstrated the potential positive consequences of recognising consumer distrust in triggering constructive institutional change. The TRUSTINFOOD project is complemented by the TRUST project (see separate project fiche).

More information

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Project Essentials

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