

Food Chain transparency in evolution: modes, methods & impacts

**David Barling
Centre for Food Policy,
City University London**

**Presentation to
Towards Food Systems Transparency workshop
Oxford Food Governance Group
St Cross College,
Oxford University
16 May 2013**

Transparency's dual identity...

- **Principle** = more open and democratic approach
 - e.g. key value (under governance) in SDC (2011) *Sustainability & UK Food Policy, 2000-2011* UK
- **Tool** = means toward a desired end
 - E.g. *Targeted transparency* (Fung et al 2007) = ways to improve public policies

Fung, A., Graham, M., Weil, D. (2007) *Full Disclosure: The Perils of Transparency*

Some research findings & further reflections

- ***Transparent_Food: Quality and Integrity in food – a challenge for chain communication and transparency research*** [Dec. 2009- Nov. 2011]. EU 7th Research Framework

Two areas of this study:

- ***Food integrity***: environmental, social and ethical issues
 - Focus on information *access, verification & monitoring, & impact*
- ***Signals*** from ***stakeholders*** along the chain (inc. to consumers)
 - Focus on information *transmission* of food integrity

Food integrity & signals: focus on certification schemes

Certification schemes **offer**

- “*visual transparency*” making it possible to “*see along the chain*”

(Muttersburgh and Lyon 2010)

- But **how transparent** are they?
- How **good is their information & the standards** on which it is based?
- Look at from **food integrity aspect**:= environmental, social & ethical

Food standards, certification schemes & the supply chain

- **Competitive & non competitive advantages**
- **External & internal facing** along supply chain
- **Market translations** of principles & impacts
- **Questions of boundaries & thresholds** = negotiated
- **Questions of methodologies** used



Certification schemes & transparency: environmental, social & ethical aspects

- Survey of European certification schemes in these areas of food integrity to assess:
 - verification
 - the formal accessibility (openness) of information,
 - the consumer accessibility (ease of understanding)
 - whether a scheme requires that product identities are segregated (a prerequisite for food chain communication on product item level)

Some findings

- Variable compliance for certification
 - e.g. GLOBAL GAP – levels of compliance” must haves”, “haves”, “recommendations”.
- Good environmental impacts coverage but some criteria. impacts poorly covered:
 - emissions of toxic substances e.g. pesticides & heavy metals
 - water us.
- verification of information including ongoing monitoring of compliance become critical for transparency
 - E.g. variable in process based schemes including agricultural practice

Some findings cont....

- Question how robust is the evidence base
 - e.g. animal welfare = resource access: space, feed & water – not monitoring of animals health. **Support not assure** welfare
- Need comparable data impact assessment that can be conveyed along the chain.
- Consistency of data still evolving
- Some private/public data bases being used more regularly e.g. Ecoinvent; PAS 2050 Carbon footprint measure; International Reference Life Cycle Data System (ILCD)

Methodologies & policy development: European Commission

Policy Initiative

European Food Sustainable Consumption Production (SCP) Roundtable (2009-) co-chairs **DG Environment & European Food & Feed Trade Associations**. Supported by Joint Research Council's (**JRC**) Institute for Environmental Sustainability (**IES**)

DG Environment & JRC/IES (2011 - 2012): *Harmonised framework methodology for the calculation of the environmental footprint of products.*

Details

Facilitate **agreement** on **environmental assessment methodologies** for food products & **environmental information** on products via agreed voluntary communication to consumers.

Framework methodology for most main industrial sectors including agriculture and food to be finalised by late 2012.

continued

Roadmap to a Resource Efficient Europe (2011) part of the actions from *Europe 2020: A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth* (2010)

Long-term policy goals with milestones: e.g.

- **20% reduction** in the food chain's resource inputs (2020).
- **Develop a methodology for sustainability criteria for food commodities** by 2014...
- Sustainable Food Communication (DG Environment) 2013/4

Suitability of the potential extension of the *Ecolabel to food* products

Background report recommended **rejecting** this on the basis of **lack of clear and agreed methodologies** etc. making extension unlikely

Civil society & industry initiated certification standards & logos



UK Consumer (prompted) awareness of schemes

Which survey 2010

- Fairtrade 82%
- Organic 54%
- Rainforest Alliance 33%
- Carbon Trust Footprint 21%
- Freedom Food 20%
- Red Tractor 20%
- Marine Stewardship 6%
- Conservation Grade 4%
- Leaf 3%

Before today, which, if any of the following food labelling schemes had you heard of?

Signalling food integrity

Transparent_Food project) →

Asked **supply chain stakeholders** (2010-11):

- **Strengths and weaknesses of certification schemes in signalling information to consumers?**
- **Focus on environmental, social and ethical schemes & messages = signalling sustainability**
 - **Stakeholders** = Farming, manufacturers, retailers, food service, certification schemes & NGOs

View from food industry June 2012

“Today, you wont find a label on food saying, ‘This is botulism-free’. People expect that.

In a few years time, you shouldn’t have to be told that this produce has used water sustainably or that one is dolphin-friendly, because it shouldn’t be on the shelves unless it is. It’s a long journey but that’s where we are heading to.”

- FDF director Sustainability & Competitiveness.

Key challenges

- **Challenging issues to communicate to consumers are:**
 - food safety
 - origin
 - environmental impacts and sustainability
 - animal welfare
- **Reasons include:**
 - **complexities** re: **issues & methodological** approaches to sustainability
 - **legislation** measures in these areas **not robust & were selective** (e.g. origin and animal welfare)

Role of certification schemes

- **Enable retailers and NGOs** to meet their **own agendas and aims**.

Standards system & audit enables...

'confidence that producers within our system are complying with the standard'
Global Manufacturer

- **Certification schemes role in fostering cooperation and harmonisation of signalling** e.g. BRC's Global Standard for Food Safety.

- **BUT Competition continues...**

*'It **actually helps** if (retailer) X and Y carries the fair trade label too because it gives the consumers a **reference point**, we just want to say that **we do better** so all our coffee and tea is fair trade and that other supermarket might be 10%, so because it is fair trade you have a reference point between their 10% and your 100%.'*

Grocery Retailer

Role of certification schemes

- **3rd party independent certification** schemes important in ensuring the **validity and credibility of information signalled to consumers.**

*'In order to communicate that we are meeting the highest standards to consumers, consumers need to have some **credible, independent, third party communication of that.** There is not one single scheme, which covers animal welfare, environmental sustainable, social and labour standards and so on. So we look at **commodities on a case-by-case basis and we look at who is the best partner to work with.***

Global Manufacturer

Information Transmission & Signal Management

- Signals require **management** = practices of **information editing**
- **Information editing** = the use, presentation and accessibility of information and the editing of information by stakeholders.
- Information editing enables **stakeholders to develop coherent signal narratives** about food products & balance offering **too much** and **too little** information to consumers
- **Stakeholders** information & actions respond to how **food issues** are discussed and represented **in broader society**.

Information editing by certification schemes...

*‘So this is one problem we have **on doing this job effectively on behalf of farmers because farmers** are really close to what they have to do to meet our standards to meet the standards of the retailers and therefore **cannot understand why we are not putting out really detailed information about the welfare of chicken, or info on pesticides.** And the **reason we don’t do that is that consumers are just not interested, and we know that because we sit down and do focus groups with them, 99% per cent they are interested in some level of reassurance that someone is looking after stuff on their behalf and they can feed it to their children’.***

Certification scheme owner

...by retail

*'You pick three things, you are going to tell people about the **health issues** with it, because threat **is legal** you have to tell them that about salts, fats and sugars and frankly I put that in my body so I really want to know that information, **second**, you are going to tell people **about the packaging** because you are going to be left with the packaging problem , and you might tell me all about the Amazon , but I am stuck here with the packaging and I need to know what to do , and then the **third tertiary level** is that you **might be left with space to tell** about where the product came from , **the sourcing story** , so I **have got a ready meal** , I could tell you about the spuds and the fish, but I **will probably tell you about the fish story or free range eggs in a quiche**. So we will pick the most relevant story but not all of it'.*

Grocery Retailer

Information editing → Choice editing

*'Information editing, so what we say is that people cannot respond to it all. And that takes you onto this next point which is **choice editing**, you can only buy fair-trade tea and coffee from us and we only use free range eggs so **in a way you don't need a label** on the product because **our brand promise** is that all our eggs are free range'*

Grocery Retailer

Beyond certification schemes: corporate lead sustainable supply initiatives

- Market innovators developing **their own product supply chains that embed sustainability**.
- Signalled to consumer via **own label & non-label** information e.g. CSR & sustainability reports.
- **Examples:**
 - **M & S Plan A** ‘Sustainability is central to how we do business and Plan A will help us to stay ahead in a fast moving world’.
 - **Unilever Sustainable Living Plan**
 - **Sainsbury's 20 by 20 Sustainability Plan** ‘ One only has to pick up the daily newspapers to see the challenges facing our society, economy and planet to understand why.’ Consultation with NGOs & other stakeholders.

Food chain signals & information transmission

Accepted wisdom

- Either **Business to Business Communication B 2 B**
- Or **Business to Consumer Communication B 2 C**

Now add:

- **Signaling** of relevant information to the public & consumers = a **complex** set of **processes of transmission**
- **Business to Business to Consumer Communication B 2 B 2 C**
- also **Consumer to Consumer C 2 C**
 - (e.g. M & S Plan A 5 year review)
 - Retailers embrace the bloggers?

Social Media and social activism

*“...there has been a revolution in technology that has made **horizontal networks the default mode of activism** and protest... destroyed the traditional means of disseminating ideologies...and has made **social media the irreversible norm**....the emergence of what Manuel Castells calls the **‘networked individual’**- expansion of the space and power of individual human beings and a change in the way they think; a change in the rate of change of ideas; an expansion of available knowledge...*

Paul Mason (2013) “Why its still kicking off everywhere?”
Soundings, 53: 44

What does this tell us about food system transparency?

- Transparency as a **tool** = **incomplete access**
- Provide **partial** information on **credence** characteristics
- Signals and certification schemes about food integrity are a form of **information editing and management**
- Risk/supply management **strategies** for corporations
- Underlying these forms are **incomplete** but **evolving methodologies**
- Based on **incomplete/proxy** forms of **data** – move to more **consistency**
- Social media generating& adding new forms of information exchange – but **what types of information?** To what effect?
- **Transparency processes** become (like food labelling demands) a **reflection of the conflicts** over food and the food system
- Are these current **modes & methods** generating **what we need to know about the food system?**