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Ethical drivers for meat quality and safety

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The question is: How to respond to consumer and societal demand on quality and safety of meat, and more specifically, what are these demands in terms of ethical drivers? What are the values which are to be integrated when operating in a food chain, or when designing research focused on the food chain?

Safety is in fact a quality, hygienic quality. Ethical issues arise when there is a trade-off between safety and economic imperatives. What is the cost of a human life? What is the cost of public health? Can they be sacrificed to the economic profit of one agent of the food chain? We all know examples for which this question is pertinent (BSE, meat processing in certain food chains,...).

Quality of meat can be assessed, as Jeff Wood recalled it in this Meeting, by physical measures (tenderness, ...) or chemical measures (proportion of fat, nature of fatty acids, ...). We can speak then of “objective quality”.

On the other hand, other qualities rely upon the perception of the person eating the meat. It is what we can name “subjective qualities”.

Appetence, satisfaction, depend on the senses of the person consuming the meat: vision, smell, taste, which are physiological filters, but depend also on the cultural background. Everybody don't like eating frogs, snails, or even dogs... So, the values attached to the product are important.

Animal welfare respect is obviously a value widely recognized. Responses of the European citizens recorded by the different Eurobarometer polls, a recent FAIR project on “Consumer concerns about animal welfare and the impact on food choice” demonstrate this concern, and the respect of animal welfare, due to the fact that they are recognized as sentient beings, is carved in the EU Amsterdam treaty, after being stressed by the Council of Europe.

Beside animal welfare, we can also think of animal integrity: can we transform the very nature of animals in any way in order to fulfil our needs? What can we think of the case of the featherless chickens?

Some may say that such concerns have a lowest weight when under-nutrition or affordability of meat is a problem in a given society or for a part of the society, or are not compatible with some cultural background of a given society. This poses the question of the ethical relativism. But, on the other hand, must not we search for common European values, and even universal values, such as are human rights? There is in fact a move to set up internationally recognized standards under the OIE initiative.

But other important ethical issues can be identified in relation to the meat food chain:

Regarding human dignity: Is there any gender issue linked to the system? What is the role of women in the process, and is equity respected in their case? What about the children? Are they for example employed as shepherders in place of being offered an education in school? Are workers protected by regulations and trade unions?

Regarding the economical field: Is the added value fairly shared along the production chain between producers, commercial in-between, processors, retailers? Is the autonomy of the consumers respected? Have they a true liberty of informed choice of the products they buy?

Regarding the socio-cultural aspects: What could be the consequences of an adaptation of meat production systems for the farmers, for the traditional way of life, for the cultural heritage?

All these questions, with those regarding the consequences of the food chain on environment evoked by Isabel Casasús, and which carry values linked to our responsibility towards the nature and the future generations, have to be addressed while working at the level of the meat production chain.