

Good practices and ethical issues in food safety related research



Interview with Dr. Rallou Thomopoulos, researcher at the National France Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and the Environment, on Good practices and ethical issues in food safety related research.

Ethical aspects are of paramount importance in food safety related research, says Dr. Rallou Thomopoulos, researcher at INRAE, National France Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and the Environment, (Institut Agro, IATE) in Montpellier, France. Dr. Thomopoulos, who is currently one of the leaders in the EU research program SAFFI (Safe Food For Infants), emphasizes that two main ethical aspects are prevalent in food safety related research, namely: 1) the protection of the environment surrounding the experiments conducted, which includes the research staff carrying out the experiments. 2) the ethics of collective decision, which is implied in the cost-benefit balance of the choices made to enhance food safety, with the involvement of different stakeholders and possibly personal data considerations.

Protection of the environment surrounding the experimental research

Ethics related to environmental protection and safety concerns research activities that involve the use of elements that may cause harm to the environment, to animals or plants, or to humans, including research staff. In food safety related research in particular, research labs must be aware of the possible harm to the environment caused by the research and the measures to be taken to mitigate the risks. Practically, they must ensure that appropriate health and safety procedures conforming to the legislation are applied for staff involved in the research.

Ethics of collective decision

Addressing societal issues such as public health management through food safety control, involves several stakeholders with different visions of the system, different expectations from the research carried out, and possibly conflicts of interest. Supporting decision-making in such a multi-actor context implies some ethics of decision and relies on the principle of justice in decision-making, since different points of view have



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to be reconciled. In the case of food safety related research, experts from different disciplines are involved (e.g. food safety, nutrition, food processing), various stakeholders are consulted (e.g. consumers, food companies, public authorities, researchers). In bottom-up hazard control performed by food companies and top-down hazard control performed by food safety authorities, there is a common responsibility and interest in preventing public health problems related to the food chain and a common investment in the food chain safety. Nevertheless, expectations regarding the research carried out may differ. On the move towards modernized hazard control methods, food companies would possibly prioritize, as essential criteria, high-throughput tools and cost-efficiency for self-monitoring in routine use, ease of implementation, and affordable initial investment costs; while on the other hand, for safety authorities, the method capacity to discover unsuspected hazards could be salient. When choices have to be made, whatever the method used to reconcile viewpoints (e.g. using risk-benefit analysis and multi-criteria decision, it is based on underlying decision principles. Unfortunately, it is a well-known issue with voting rules (ways of making a decision based on the aggregation of stakeholders' preferences) that none is perfect and each one of them has some defects. Importantly, the choice of the voting rule might impact the decision that is made, a decision that consequently might misrepresent the preferences of the actors. It is thus a matter of justice to acknowledge the bias associated with the decision-making mechanism that is chosen and try to address it.

Finally, discussing the importance of ethics of collective decision

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TO READ MORE ON THIS AND THE RESERCH OF DR. THOMOPOULOS:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2667009722000100>



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- Coordination: French National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and Environment (INRAE),
- Five international infant food companies (Friesland Campina, HiPP, YIOTIS, Beingmate, YFFC)
 - Two food safety authority institutions (ZAIQ and ANSES)
 - Three European technological SMEs (CremeGlobal, Computomics, BDS)
 - The Union of 49 National European Societies of Pediatric (EPA-UNEPSA)
 - Seven leading European and Chinese academic institutions (WU, UNITO, IRTA, IVV; ZJU, ZAAS, JAAS)



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