

Ethics in agri-food governance: responsibility, transparency and unintended consequences

Damian Maye¹, James Kirwan¹ and Gianluca Brunori²

¹University of Gloucestershire, UK

²University of Pisa, Italy

dmaye@glos.ac.uk; jkirwan@glos.ac.uk; gianluca.brunori@unipi.it

Introduction

This paper argues that ethics needs to be built more explicitly into food chain sustainability assessments. This is no easy task because of the tendency to frame ethics in simplistic ways using dichotomies that delineate between global (bad) and local (good), fast (bad) and slow (good), etc. In reality, discourses, knowledges, representations and norms of food chain performance are highly contested. This demands an approach to food chain governance that works with, rather than against, complexity and methodologies that legitimise and give voice to multiple stakeholder perspectives in order to develop shared understandings of ethics in relation to food chain sustainability (Brunori et al., 2016; Kirwan et al, 2017a). As Pereira and Ruysenaar (2012, p. 51) put it, “any ‘ethical’ systemic intervention... need[s] to involve as many perspectives as possible in order to be legitimate”.

We argue that one way to do this is through the identification of ‘ethical attributes’. Attributes are characteristics associated with the performance of particular food chains that are reflected in common discourses and can be assessed (Kirwan et al, 2017b). There are two ways that we can think about ethical attributes in this regard (Kirwan et al, 2017a): first, ‘*problematized*’ attributes, which signify commonly identified ethical dilemmas routinely discussed yet open to debate and subject to refinement and change; and second, ‘*procedural*’ attributes, which describe actions that encourage actors in the food chain to organise and structure themselves so as to more explicitly embody ethical considerations in their activities. Procedural attributes are particularly important from a governance perspective as mechanisms that can ‘action ethics’, with responsibility a key part of this. Building on two recent papers we have had published, the rest of the paper considers more explicitly what we mean by responsibility in this context and how it can link to transparency, and more broadly to the notion of ‘unintended consequences’ as articulated through Chandler’s (2013) conceptualisation of ‘resilience ethics’. In this respect, there may not be obvious transparency, yet this does not negate the significance of taking / encouraging responsibility (Young, 2003). This in turn raises important wider questions about strategies of responsabilisation, governance and governmentality.

Conceptualisation and Methods

We start this section with a review of how responsibility is conceptualised in sustainability research and policy, drawing on Evans et al.’s (2017) recent analysis of sustainable consumption and food waste. This work – and earlier work by Barnett et al., (2011) – usefully highlights the way intermediaries use mechanisms (food waste reduction projects, fair trade labels, etc.) to ‘responsibilise’ the consumer. This work shows, for instance, evidence for the responsabilisation of the consumer and, more recently, a *distributed responsibility*, shifting the politics of blame away from the consumer, with the responsibilities of other actors, especially supermarkets, more evident in relation to food waste. Another important aspect of responsibility is the firm-level application of responsibility practices and the corporate social responsibility (CSR) behaviour of food companies. Transparency is crucial in this context. For example, Dubbink et al. (2008) examine how transparency policy should be organised and strategies used. They argue that *informational intermediate organisations* are vital.

In the paper, we use these recent studies of responsibility (one consumer focused, one firm-level focused) to review how responsibility is framed using findings from a recently completed EC-funded project (GLAMUR - *Global and local food chain assessment: a multidimensional performance-based approach*), which examined actors' perceptions of food chain performance in 12 different countries and across four spheres of debate (public, market, scientific and policy). This involved a systematic analysis of how the performance of food chains is perceived, defined and communicated. The wider analysis of these discourses is reported elsewhere (Kirwan et al 2017a/b; Brunori et al., 2016). In this paper, responsibility and transparency – which emerged as important mechanisms by which to improve food chain sustainability – are the focus of analysis. While neither of these terms are new, as well as being common features of the ethical foodscape, the findings from the GLAMUR analysis, combined with new published work on responsibility, suggest that, given recent food system pressures, there is now an important opportunity to reassess what responsibility and transparency mean and how they are applied to develop more reflexive systems of food governance that more actively incorporate ethics.

Results

In general terms, the GLAMUR data suggest there is evidence of the presence of ethical debates and questions in national discourses, especially in the public sphere about, for example, fairer prices, animal welfare rights, labour relations, global food security, and protecting local heritage and traditions. These examples are illustrative of 'ethical dilemmas' and a key feature that characterises them is their presence in the public sphere as a common good that is the object of discussion and debate. The identification of key issues that raise ethical dilemmas (such as animal welfare or labour conditions) is a common approach in work of this nature and it helps to enable assessment of the ethical responsibility of actors; however, we argue that procedural ethics are more important as drivers of change when assessing food chain performance. Examples identified include the transparency of information flows, the acknowledgement and organisation of responsibility, and governance patterns that can help develop new practices, norms, frames and policies. The outcome of which is a more pragmatic and dynamic ethics.

We argue that strategies of responsabilization can be delineated in two main ways (Kirwan et al., 2017a). Firstly, at a firm-level in terms of: a) the presence of a firm's procedures to account for specific attributes; and b) the range of attributes for which firms are accountable. In this sense it is about ensuring that food chains maintain standards of responsible business conduct (see OECD-FAO 2016). Secondly, it extends to consumers and policy stakeholders. At a policy level, the neoliberalisation of 'responsibility' through cost and responsibility sharing, evident in the way livestock diseases are governed (Maye et al., 2014), is one obvious expression. From a consumer perspective, debates about 'sustainable diet' and moral questions related to 'choice editing', 'nudging' and the role of retailers in influencing consumer choice through the wider retail environment, raise important questions about sustainable consumption governance and the responsibility of retailers to positively influence behavior in relation to sustainability.

Discussion

This paper addresses the potential role of procedural ethics (via mechanisms, intermediaries, etc) as a means to create more sustainable food production and consumption. To what extent do they offer the potential to make consumers and food companies more aware of the unintended consequences of practices / behavior, or do we need to be more critical of their governmental intention and what they eventually deliver? This in turn has implications in terms of how we assess pragmatic actions as procedural ethics in relation to wider questions about the neoliberalisation of responsibility and the responsabilisation of neoliberalism.