



Network on Communications Experts Minutes of the 6th meeting

**Held on 21-22 October 2019, Bundesinstitut fuer Risikobewertung
(BfR), Berlin
(Agreed on 25.11.2019)**

Participants

- Network Representatives of Member States:**

Country	Name
Austria	-
Belgium	Jean-Sebastien Walhin
Bulgaria	Mariela Pchelinska
Croatia	Sara Mikrut
Cyprus	Chrystalla Kaiafa
Czech Republic	Vladimir Brychta
Denmark	Heidi Kornholt
Estonia	Piret Priisalu
Finland	Jari Eloranta
France	Sophie Le Quellec
Germany	Gaby-Fleur Boel, Suzan Fiack
Greece	Nikolaos Katerelos
Hungary	Erika Országh
Ireland	Jane Ryder
Italy	-
Latvia	-
Lithuania	Jurgita Savickaite
Luxembourg	Jeannette Mueller
Malta	-
Netherlands	Carla Geijskes
Poland	Katarzyna Floryanowicz
Portugal	Ana Oliveira
Romania	Rares Mihai Habeanu
Slovakia	Lucia Milec
Slovenia	Nusa Kerk
Spain	Milagros Nieto Martinez
Sweden	Karin Gustafsson
United Kingdom	-
Iceland	Hjalti Andrason
Norway	Ingrid Hoie
Switzerland	Eva Van Beek

- **Representatives of Pre-accession Countries**

Country	Name
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Dalibor Vidacak
Kosovo	Lamir Thaci
Montenegro	Jelenar Vracar Filipovic
North Macedonia	Nikola Savovski
Serbia	Igor Grabez
Turkey	Nevra Ozcan

- **European Commission:**

Peter Bokor
Edward Demicoli

- **EFSA:**

COMCO Department (Barbara Gallani, Alessandra Triulzi)

COM Unit (James Ramsay, Luca Schombert, Anthony Smith, Domagoj Vrbos)

- **Others:**

EFSA Working Group on Social Research Methods and Advice: Fabiana Zollo

BfR (Lena Sophie Baudach. Other BfR staff members joined in for the social science topic)

1. Welcome and apologies for absence

Apologies were received by (Elisabeth Publig / Austria, Piret Priisalu / Estonia, Carlotta Ferroni / Italy, Steven Pollock / United Kingdom).

Barbara Gallani and Gaby-Fleur Böl opened the 6th CEN meeting at the BfR premises in Berlin.

2. Adoption of agenda

The agenda was adopted without changes.

3. Agreement of the minutes of the 5th meeting of the Network on Communications Experts held on 21-22 March 2019 in EFSA.

The minutes were agreed by written procedure on 24 May 2019 and published on the EFSA website 27 May 2019.

4. Topics for discussion

Risk Communication” at the BfR, by Gaby-Fleur Böl, Head of BfR’s Risk Communication Department

Gaby-Fleur Boel (GFB) gave a presentation highlighting BfR's role in aiming to reduce the gap between experts and laypeople.

The BfR is currently working on several topics such as vegan diets, food fraud, genome editing. The BfR already has awareness on the latter topic through their consumer monitor and have additionally conducted focus groups for more in-depth knowledge.

GFB also explained the different activities the BfR is offering to the public and scientists from different fields (summer schools etc.).

4.1 Advisory Forum and Focal Points update:

- Action from AF to develop Line To Take (LTT) on microplastics;

Barbara Gallani (BG) explained that at the 72nd Meeting of the EFSA Advisory Forum, it was agreed that EFSA – in consultation with the Communications Expert Network (CEN) – should develop messages on microplastics and nanoplastics in food and feed. This should include EFSA/Member States scientific knowledge/data gaps to fill, as well as how and when they will be addressed.

BG then showed the draft LTT on the topics and where data gaps and consequent research needs are. Moreover, she gave an update on the recent research activities carried out by the international, European and Member State authorities. She also mentioned that EFSA will be hosting a scientific colloquium on microplastics and nanoplastics in food on the 8-9 June 2020.

NO stated to have recently published a report on microplastics.

- Action from AF to promote EU FORA at national level

James Ramsay (JR) asked CEN members to help promote EU FORA fellowship schemes at national level.

- Action: many countries working on microplastics on their own > EFSA to help coordinate the developments of the LTT (Anthony Smith)
- Action: finalise the LTT on microplastics ahead of the AF meeting in November (Anthony Smith)

4.2 CEN Work Plan – update

Anthony Smith (AS) presented the CEN workplan for 2020. The proposed objectives, developed with a focus on the new Transparency Regulations, are: coordinated communication, sharing best practice and targeted risk communication.

AS noted that most of the objectives in the 2019 Work Plan were successfully completed.

Moreover, AS stated that EFSA is progressively moving away from the DMS to Microsoft 365 as a repository for documents and communication platform.

Participants discussed the communication tools as well, especially WhatsApp. Some members consider it too private; others praise it as an efficient and uncomplicated way to communicate among each other.

BG commented on the proposal to run a major campaign in 2020, with active support from Member States and the European Commission.

AS gave an update on contacts with international partners on World Food Safety Day 2020. Codex/FAO/WHO have decided to follow a similar theme to 2019 message. WHO is likely to take the lead on the WFSD 2020 content development.

4.3 Presentation of EFSA's Communication activities

JR gave a presentation on hot topic calls and planning in 2020.

JR asked the audience about the usefulness and format of hot topic calls, as in 2019 not all hot topic calls were well attended by CEN Members.

SE said it is extremely useful but when they need it. They do not attend every call.

CY suggested the use of alternative platform, such as webinars.

DE said hot topic calls are a real milestone. It is highly appreciated and helps to prepare communications at an early stage.

Barbara Gallani asked CEN members what prevents them from participating in the hot topic calls.

CH said that it is mainly due to a high workload and once because of technical problems.

CEN members stated that EFSA gives too short notice of upcoming hot topic calls.

BE stated that bullet points in the prenotification are usually self-explanatory and sufficient for member states to prepare. BE also suggested that EFSA' dissemination strategy could be summarised in bullet points ahead of a hot topic call.

BG prompted CEN members to ask directly via email if they have specific questions.

- Action: EFSA to share dissemination strategy in form of bullet points ahead of hot topic call and to provide notice of the call more in advance when feasible. (Anthony Smith/Communications Officers)

JR presented the 2019 hot topic calls:

- Regarding Bisphenol A, FR and CH showed interest.
- CH and RO are interested in African Swine Fever.

JR presented provisional planning of 2020:

- DK interested in food waste
- DE and DK interested in gene drive
- BPS no interest shown by the CEN
- DE interested in PFAS

- CH interested in synthetic biology
- DE and NO raised interest in Ethoxyquin

4.4 Key Country Issues

- **Iceland:** STEC E. coli in Iceland and HUS in children – communications aspects

IS presented a recent case. The background concerned a new EFTA requirement to open borders to meat imports with Icelandic sheep mainstay of diet/economy (meat/wool). The huge increase in tourism, also on farms, has raised the need for checks, which were made for STEC *e.Coli* and found in 30% of lamb, 11.5% of beef.

During a recent outbreak, 24 children who visited a farm became ill, the close location (within 5m) of a calf-shed and ice cream shop were responsible.

Comms challenges: three authorities were involved, there was a need to speak with one voice; when should the farm be shut down/named in the media; as more children got sick, the farm was closed, but how high is the threshold?; shutdown or preventative measures, what is the timing; the stakeholders asked to delay the press release, but revealed this to the media; the cause of the outbreak was subject to speculation vs hard facts.

An article was published on risks from high pressure spray cleaning of calf pen, but without mentioning name of the farm. In a different case of increased deaths among sheep, experts believed the cause was nutrient-deficient hay, but were reluctant to go public with this finding.

- **Belgium:** Food product recall systems and channels for aligning communications + discussion on approaches across Members

BE presented its recall procedures with the aim of stimulating a debate on differences and possible need for common procedures across EU countries.

BE asked the Members for information re their recall procedures. About one-third of Members have responsibility for recalls, which is mainly a risk management task.

Considering the confusion created for consumers if there is a lack of consistency in actions taken across borders, it was agreed that sharing of information and common approach would be beneficial. There is a role for the European Commission.

- Action: Member States to share their approaches and any relevant information on how they manage communications around recalls
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** Tackling fake news in BiH and round-up

BiH presented an online platform established by an NGO to do factchecking. The EC has stated that fake news is a major issue for joint intelligence chiefs. An emerging issue, it was word of the year in 2016 and 2017.

The methodology of the platform includes: criteria for selection; no of visits; publication pointing to doubtful ethics/standards. Readers can report suspicious articles. An online tool examines the content. They publish the results.

Food safety cases have included fake eggs, cement-filled walnuts, mud not pepper although none of these issues have ever been detected in BiH.

Round-up of other activities: promoted WFSD 2019 with a conference in Mostar. Also hosted (in Sarajevo) the first EFSA Focal Point meeting in a Pre-Accession country.

- **Germany:** Round-up & focus on Genome editing - a new challenge in communication?

Round-up: DE continued the discussion on fake news by explaining how analysis of consumer monitor data and the time needed to discuss the results makes reaction difficult.

Genome editing: Possible to alter genetic material with DNA scissors. BfR held a symposium in 2016 and a consumer conference in Sep 2019. The results included: consumers want precaution, freedom of choice, social over economic considerations should prevail, no patents for living things.

- **Hungary:** "The Survivor Eggs" – a new, innovative, educational reality TV show on animal health and welfare

HU presented a recent campaign "Survivor eggs" aimed at promoting animal health and welfare issues in Hungary. HU aims to promote social awareness of issues every year, in 2019 it is focused on animal husbandry. NEBIH used 'the egg that broke Instagram' (with 53m+ likes) as a peg for its campaign and launched just before Easter. With a relatively small budget and two main messages ('Don't give live animals as gifts', 'Animals are not toys'), the results were extremely positive with 40k+ YouTube views and higher than expected press interest.

- **Sweden:** Dietary advice for the elderly.

SE is running a campaign prompted by the Swedish government as part of a policy to inform the elderly about eating healthily (to combat risks of falling). The target audience were the elderly who lose their appetite. This was a new challenge for SFA – few see the connection between food and falling accidents, and many 65+ don't consider themselves 'elderly', it's harder to reach men than women on health issues. A study of food habits was needed. Publications, brochure, ads and short SoMe video were used. The campaign is underway therefore its impact is not yet known but could be reported to CEN in the future.

4.5 Risk Communication best practice series: revamp of the RC Handbook

AS gave an update on input from Members for the ongoing refresh of the Risk Communications Handbook. The volunteer members will follow up on the proposals after the meeting. The project should run until Q3-Q4 2020 to take account of the ongoing thinking behind a future General Plan for Risk Communication.

Members agreed with the proposal to move forward on the layout and design of the other two publications in the series: crisis communications guidelines; uncertainty communication guidance.

- Action: EFSA content/graphic design teams to prepare layout designs for crisis/uncertainty comms publications (31/01/2020) for possible publication in Q1 2020. (Content/Graphic Design teams)

- Action: The 4 MS and EFSA to share and further develop ideas for Handbook revamp on the new CEN Teams platform (31/01/2020) (CEN Secretariat/BG/DE/HR/ES)

4.6 Overview of the Transparency Regulation and implications for comms coordination

Péter Bokor (PB) gave a presentation on “improving the transparency and sustainability of the EU risk assessment in the food chain”, introducing the Transparency Regulations. Room for improvement was identified in the transparency of the risk assessment of regulated products and in the effectiveness of risk communication. PB also highlighted on the following four pillars: sustainability and governance of EFSA; quality & reliability of studies; improved risk communication; and transparency of EU risk assessment.

JR gave a presentation with a specific focus on Art. 8 of the Transparency Regulations. The main challenge for EFSA will be to translate the law into concrete procedures to deliver on EFSA’s mandate. Specifically, the General Plan for Risk Communication anticipates an integrated framework for risk communication by risk assessors and risk managers at EU and national levels; the identification of key factors to consider for RC; the type of activities, tools and channels to use; and open dialogue mechanisms.

The European Commission will develop the thinking behind the General Plan in consultation with EFSA, Member States and Stakeholders.

DE noted that transparency is linked to trust, stressing the importance of layperson/plain language summaries.

- Action: EFSA to consider the role of layman summaries (EFSA Journal)
- Action: EC/EFSA to continue to liaise with CEN on the development of proposals for a future General Plan on Risk Communication.

4.7 Group work: Case study analysis focusing on four elements of the Regulation

Groups were working on specific case studies:

- Group 1: Fake news (case study: e.Coli) facilitated by James Ramsay
- Group 2: Hazard vs risk (case study: Glyphosate) facilitated by Domagoj Vrbos
- Group 3: Divergences (case study: Dioxins) facilitated by Anthony Smith
- Group 4: Risk perceptions (case study: GMO) facilitated by Luca Schombert

Find here the [Report on the breakout session](#)

- Action: Hazard vs Risk – consider how best to disseminate, translate, use the existing materials as part of a possible joint cross-EU campaign in 2020 (TBC)

- Action: Report from workshop to feed into work by EFSA Working Group on Social Research Methods and Advice (Content and Social Science Team, 30/11/2019)

4.8 Panel-led open discussion:

A member from each group was invited to participate in a panel discussion to give feedback on the groupwork results and talk about national examples of coordinated communications and their views on the General Plan for Risk Communications.

BG asked the panel following question: if we could improve risk communication in one aspect in the EU – what would we work on collectively?

The following ideas were expressed: independence of risk assessor from risk managers in communication; the need to explain scientific studies in detail and the role of lay summaries.

A discussion about fake news and divergence developed and on how diverging messages across EU may confuse consumers. Some members advocated a common monitoring protocol for fake news in the EU and on strengthened risk communication capacity at national level.

4.9 Follow up to the 2019 Eurobarometer (EB) study:

- Discussion and prioritisation of further research proposals (from EFSA WG on Social Research Methods and Advice)

Domagoj Vrbos (DV) announced the selection of five IPA countries for extending the EB 2019. Why/how do a Eurobarometer? DV states it is just a consumer reflection, not an in-depth analysis. The EB 2019 looked at: concerns, choices, information, behaviour change, trust, system knowledge. In developing the questions, EFSA used surveys from several Members (DE, HU, IT, UK).

How has EFSA used the EB results so far? Mainly it has been used in communications, e.g. published on WFSD 2019, generating a lot of media interest on science (antibiotics, microplastics). Also, in a new infographic on concerns about misuse of antibiotics in meat.

Luca Schombert (LS) presents 'myth busting' findings from the EB. Regarding the finding that 4 out of 5 Europeans are not concerned mainly with safety, many comments were received from Members (BE, HR, CY). There was also a discussion among the Members on the sources of information about food risks:

Workshop for social research topics 2020

Workshop: The Members and observers were asked to express topics/areas of interest for social research, which EFSA would conduct in 2020, to provide insights for risk communication.

- Action: EFSA social scientists to provide overview of results of the CEN meeting sessions for EB data and social research (30/11/2019) (Content and Social Science Team)
- Action: EFSA social scientists to provide country overview of EB data based on interest expressed during the CEN meeting (31/03/2020) (Content and Social Science Team)

4.10 Using social research to inform risk communication:

- Guest speaker – H2020 Project QUEST Quality and Effectiveness in Science and Technology communication – introducing the pilot phase

The guest speaker, Fabiana Zollo (FZ), presented “Dealing with digital misinformation: A polarized context of narratives and tribes”. FZ explained how the amount of data on topics is growing due to new technologies in an always more connected world and how this affects human daily life. There has been a shift of paradigm from old media to new media: now everybody can create content and not only access it.

Human beings are biased by nature, this is visible also in social media. The confirmation bias, for example, ensures that people tend to consume information that they like. This leads to the creation of echo chambers: (virtual) spaces where people are driven by same values and beliefs. Echo chambers can be dangerous as people in them can radicalize their views since they are constantly exposed to the same type of information. FZ proposed a new approach composed of different disciplines: social science, statistics and computer science. This mixed approach serves in the analysis of social networks and consequently to inform risk communication.

- Action: CEN Secretariat to share further materials on Fabiana’s presentation (30/11/2019, CEN Secretariat)
- Action: CEN Members and Observers to express interest to participate in QUEST project (30/11/2019, through CEN Secretariat)
- EFSA Scientific Colloquium on micro- and nano-plastics in food (8-9 June 2020):

DV gave a presentation about the colloquium on microplastics and nanoplastics in food EFSA will host in June 2020. EFSA identified the need to generate more data on the topic and its effects on human health following exposure.

The results of the Eurobarometer identified microplastics as a growing concern. The colloquium aims to integrate a consumer perspective within the programme and to foster participation of communication specialists in the event.

- Action: EFSA social scientists to inform CEN on progress re: scientific colloquium and CEN members to promote participation among scientists and communication specialists working on the topic (colloquium set for 06/2020) (update at next CEN Meeting)
- Conclusions and housekeeping

BG the BfR for the hospitality and announced two CEN meetings in the coming year. One of those will be held in Parma.