



Germany: A nation of insecure consumers

by Ulrich Oltersdorf

Objective indicators as to the state of society, such as life expectancy, income and other such statistical data, confirm basic needs to be satisfied in Germany. Politically, too, many aims have been achieved. Never before has life in Germany been as secure as it is today.

Subjective indicators show, however, that anxieties for the future are on the increase in many industrialised countries, and are particularly high in Germany. Germans are beset by anxiety and feel plagued by uncertainty in many areas.

The history of mankind has always been accompanied by apocalyptic prophecies but today global problems are projected into the future.

The information overload is adding to the problem. The more choices and information that people have, the more difficult it is to say 'this is right', 'this is what I should do'.

We have no real knowledge of how much information we absorb every day. Driving a car and smoking are everyday activities which are accompanied by risks. But because individuals themselves are decision-makers here, these risks rank low down on the scale for them. The fact is smoking and cars kill thousands of people. However, 'radioactivity' tops the poll of health risks (*see Table 1*), despite the fact that the Chernobyl disaster happened more than 10 years ago and radiation levels for humans are small.

The case of the insecure consumer cannot be described comprehensively here but only by way of example. The individual's need and search for security and truth is not a fixed but a variable process. Different people have different viewpoints. Trust is part of a complicated communications process. A single event, a mistake, can upset the volatile state of one's sense of security. "You don't trust someone who's lied to you in the past".

A few highlights from the area of consumer insecurity regarding food will characterise the situation in Germany today. Just as there is a chronicle of 'mega accidents' in technical installations (eg. nuclear reactors in Harrisburg, Chernobyl; chemical plants such as those in Basle, Bhopal and Hoechst), there are similar incidents of food scandals in Germany (*Table 2*).

Overfocus on food additives

These, as well as reports in the mass media, lead consumers to view 'chemicals in foodstuffs' as the main risk (*Table 3*), even though they are not the real risks. There are many deaths from over-eating, alcohol consumption and inadequate food hygiene. In contrast the dangers that arise from 'chemicals in the saucepan' are few.

The consequences of this growing insecurity show up not so much in the macro-statistical consumption of food-

Table 1

PUBLIC ATTITUDE TO HEALTH RISKS

"Health issues are addressed in the print media and on television on a daily basis. Which issues make you worry about personal health risks?"

Responses (in %) by the German population (age 14 plus, Nov/Dec 1992, 1993, 1994 & 1995, n = 2,000 (West) and 500 (East) to the above question.

	1992		1993		1994		1995	
	West	East	West	East	West	East	West	East
Radioactivity	64	32	50	40	55	48	60	56
Air quality	50	43	41	36	34	32	47	39
Traffic	42	46	38	44	31	38	48	48
Cigarettes	38	40	35	40	35	50	47	58
Food/Drink	33	11	33	20	27	15	38	27
Climate	31	25	37	26	27	20	42	36
Medicaments	29	20	32	21	21	24	34	38
Stress at work	28	26	30	31	24	30	39	40
Noise	24	19	25	27	16	22	32	36
Water quality	22	13	20	16	14	13	21	17

Table 2

CHRONOLOGY OF SIGNIFICANT FOOD SCANDALS

Date	Product	Reason
August '85	Wine	Diethylenglycol
August '85	Egg noodles	Incubated eggs
October '85	Cheese	Diethylenglycol
November '85	Fish	Histamin
January '86	Wine	Glycol
March '86	Cheese	Listeria
March '87	Fish	Nematodes
April '87	Wine	Adulteration
May '87	Egg noodles	Rotten liquid egg
November '87	Cheese	Listeria
March '88	Olive oil	Perchloroethylene (PER)
April '88	Cheese	Trichloroethylene
August '88	Veal	Hormones
September '88	Wine	Re-labelling
May 1990 (first incidence)	Beef	Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy
July '92	Wine	Methyl-isothiocyanate
July '93	Paprika crisps	Salmonella
August '92	Meat	Mislabelling
April '94	Beikost	Lindan, carbamates, softeners

stuffs but appear in specific consumer studies. Every scandal has short-term negative consequences for the sector in question. In 1987 the fish worm (nematode) scandal caused a marked fall in fish consumption. As soon as one problem is overshadowed by the next scandal *status quo* is achieved again, especially if controls, reports and individual experiences show that the irregularities have been rooted out.

The BSE scare

There is a slight difference in the case of BSE. The BSE scandal has now lasted a number of years. Meat is not only 'laden' with BSE but also with hormones and there are also ethical concerns (eg. mass farming, the protection

of animals). Meat consumption in Germany is on the decrease. It peaked in 1987 with 68kg per capita per year. Currently the figure stands at just under 60kg. This is in line with guidelines from modern nutritional science which recommend a reduction in meat consumption.

The high consumption levels can be interpreted as a perceived need to catch up following meat shortages in the post-war era. While pork consumption decreased first, partly due to the negative image of its fat content, beef consumption is falling in 1996 following a renewed flaring of the BSE debate. Its share of meat consumption shrank from 29% to 20%. The younger consumer categories in particular are reducing their intake.

Changes in lifestyle

The number of vegetarians is rising, too (and now stands at almost 5%), as is that of consumers who want to know where and how the food is produced. The share of those buying 'ecological' produce is ever-increasing (*see diagram 1*). Denomination of origin in general and controlled, 'transparent' production in particular are relevant in more and more people's decision-making. Mistrust towards foreign and anonymous suppliers is growing, regional suppliers enjoy market advantages. Export produce is experiencing harder times than in the past. But alongside the drift towards 'region' and 'home' there is another one towards 'ethnic food' (Asian, Latin American cuisine). But here too transparency has an important part to play. What is on offer is supposed to be 'authentic', not an imitation. Foodstuffs which consumers think have been produced in closed factories or even in laboratories are hard to shift in more and more target groups. One such example is the consistently negative attitudes up to now towards foodstuffs which 'come in touch with' gene technology in the course of their production. A series of surveys shows that 80% have 'contra attitudes' and less than 10% are 'pro'. Everyone demands the corresponding labelling; one wants to decide for oneself what reaches the table.

The need for consumer guidance

But the increasing volume of information demands too much of people. Not all food information that is provided can be taken in. Consumers must not be left to their own devices in this but must receive orientation and practical assistance. There are too many 'negative communications spirals' in today's information and communications society. A bad image (of foodstuffs) in the media leads to 'sensitised' consumers who then take in related information much more selectively (increased ratings) and the media in turn react selectively, too, through greater coverage of the topic. What is needed to counter these phenomena represents a shared challenge for all those involved in market developments, that is suppliers (producers and traders), consumers and communicators (the media).

At present the situation is very unbalanced and commercial suppliers and communicators dominate consumer education. The state is retreating more and more. Less than DM 100 million per year is available for public con-

sumer politics; the advertising spend for chocolate and confectionery alone amounts to DM 700 million a year. In other words less than DM 1 per capita is available for state consumer education every year; in contrast the advertising spend in the food sector comes to DM 24 per capita per year. This imbalance becomes even more extreme in the current climate of cutbacks.

The appropriate consumer orientation should not and need not be a 'crisis response' but a constant and daily task for society. One that starts in early childhood and also looks at pensioners in terms of their position in market activity. This orientation requires not only theoretical and media-based information but also practical training and the handling of foodstuffs. Such tasks cost time and money but these are rewarding investments in the future which find scant recognition. The extent of consumer competence is being underestimated and the corresponding education is easily left by the wayside. Since there are no signs of a trend reversal there will be even more uncertainty among consumers in the future.

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Table 3

PUBLIC ATTITUDE TO HEALTH RISKS

Responses of the German population (from 14 years onwards, November/December 1992, 1993, 1994 and 1995, N = 2,000 (West) and 500 (East) to the following question (responses in per cent): "Many reports point to risks in the area of food quality and nutrition respectively. Which of the following, in your opinion, are of particular risk for individuals in our country?" (presented with list)

	1992		1993		1994		1995	
	West	East	West	East	West	East	West	East
Pesticide & insecticide residues in food	52	33	47	43	51	48	56	56
Spoilt food	47	46	37	46	26	46	33	49
Toxic substances in rotting food	45	44	30	32	26	36	36	54
Animal medication & hormone residues in food	45	22	35	23	29	24	42	38
Irradiated foods	38	24	40	32	36	32	43	44
Food additives	29	31	30	28	30	30	31	29
Cholesterol	23	24	20	19	15	14	21	27
Genetically altered foods	18	7	25	13	24	22	32	31
Too much/unbalanced eating	18	19	16	18	15	15	21	22
Alcohol	16	25	16	28	15	29	21	36
Unprocessed, raw foods	16	13	10	10	8	11	14	15
Natural toxins	15	11	12	13	10	14	12	22
Biotechnically altered foods	11	6	16	10	12	7	18	20



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