The Integration of Social and Behavioral Sciences in the Development of Food and Nutrition Policy and Regulations

Main author: Elizabeth Mansfield (Health Canada)

Co-authors: Michelle Patel, Rebecca Olsen, Chung-Tung Lin, Domagoj Vrbos

INTRODUCTION

The International Social Science Liaison Group (ISSLG) provides a forum for social scientists from organisations involved in food regulation, food safety and public health nutrition to discuss and collaborate on issues of mutual interest. Currently, it brings together practitioners from Australia and New Zealand, Canada, the European Union, the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

Regulatory agencies in these countries are increasingly using findings from social and behavioural sciences (SBS) in making decisions for the identification and assessment of health-related risks, and the selection, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of risk communication and risk management strategies.

In this poster, we articulate how and why SBS are becoming an increasingly important decision-making tool for the development of relevant policies and regulations by highlighting examples of the contribution these disciplines have made across members of the ISSLG.

METHODOLOGY

We used a decision-making framework developed by Health Canada to illustrate where and how SBS can be integrated throughout the decision-making process. The framework was selected as it provides a structured approach to identifying SBS roles and contributions across six phases/steps, in all of which, the involvement of interested/affected parties plays an increasingly important role:

1. Identify the issue and its context
2. Assess risks and benefits
3. Identify and analyse options
4. Select a strategy
5. Implement the strategy
6. Monitor and evaluate results

Applying this framework, we solicited input from ISSLG member agencies on the contribution of SBS in the development, implementation and communication of food and/or

nutrition-related policies and regulations. We provide examples of SBS research conducted by the various member agencies that reflect the ways in which SBS research has informed any of the 6 steps in the decision-making framework.

RESULTS

We describe here specific activities of ISSLG across the process steps. One example is provided under each of the steps.

Identify the issue and its context:

- FSANZ: Use of social research to identify areas in which existing food standards may not be fulfilling their intended purpose (e.g. review of standards relating to the labelling of infant formula products)

Assess risks and benefits:

- USFDA: Use of national survey data to assess risks in food handling behaviours (e.g. uncooked flour, hamburgers)

Identify and analyse options:

- Health Canada: Development of virtual retail experiences to assess labelling/food environment policy options on consumer behaviours

Select a strategy:

- FSANZ: Use of systematic review methods to identify existing evidence to help inform a policy (e.g. the design and content of the pregnancy warning label on alcoholic beverages)

Implement the strategy:

- UKFSA: Participation of diverse population groups in risk analysis to help explain complex scientific concepts through innovative risk communication

Monitor and evaluate results:

- EFSA: Reputation monitoring to evaluate views of institutional partners/stakeholders regarding strategy implementation.

DISCUSSION

The application of SBS in government decision making for food and nutrition policies helps achieve policy goals and meet the needs of the people and communities served. Policymakers should work with social and behavioural scientists to understand the behavioural change models and theories of change which might best apply to the risk issue at hand, and to design potential interventions, test and adapt them, and evaluate them once implemented.

SBS is also crucial to risk communication, where multiple research methods can help segment audiences, explore their current level of understanding, test risk messaging, co-create such messaging with the end-users and evaluate the effectiveness of communication.

Finally, SBS evidence can also help evaluate efficacy of proposed policy and/or regulatory interventions and the effectiveness of implemented risk management interventions.

The ISSLG group remains committed to exchanging best practices and engaging in joint projects across members of the group to advance the contribution of SBS to the development of effective food and nutrition policies and regulations globally.