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DO CONSUMERS WANT INFORMATION ABOUT AQUACULTURE ?

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Introduction

The question of whether fish consumers want information about aquaculture is complex and little studied. In AquaImpact European research programme, WP4 is dedicated to communication, including consumers' studies which first step is a qualitative study through consumers' focus-groups.

Methodology

In Finland, France and Spain, a series of five consumers' focus groups was organized during spring and summer 2019. Each focus-group gathered about 10 participants, all being fish consumers, with diversified profiles as for gender, age, professional. In the three countries, the focus-groups were organized similarly, with a moderator following a guide, asking questions and facilitating answers and discussion within the group. All focus-groups were fully recorded and fully transcribed before analysis. Each focus-groups lasted from 1,5 to 2 hours.

The discussion was organized in three main themes: 1 : Fish consumption habits and choices ; 2 : About fish farming : information existing, needs for information ; 3 : About receiving a set of information on fish farming... Theme 3 included two phases : we tested the reactions of consumers after being shown a basic information package (including a brief presentation of world aquaculture, then 6 slides about European salmon farming, as farmed salmon is imported and consumed in the three countries), then we asked the consumers their opinion about disseminating information about aquaculture to the public in the future.

Main results

Unsurprisingly, the consumed fish species and their presentation vary among the three countries, but showed no contradiction compared to the results of previous surveys. The answers show that in the three countries, some people choose strictly wild fish, because they prefer their taste or because they reject farmed fish, while others buy both wild and farmed fish, some without paying attention to the production mode. Many other criteria than 'wild' or 'farmed' have been quoted as playing a role in the buying act, notably price is important.

Information received today by consumers about fish farming is considered scarce but not actively searched (in France, and by some participants in Finland and Spain), while considered abundant by some others, in Finland and Spain. Many sources of information are quoted, from the vendor to mass media, notably TV reports being mentioned as especially important in France but bringing mainly negative information, while in Finland the contents of TV reports and social media are questioned.

Consumers expressed doubts and questions about fish farming, mostly in France, also in Finland, less in Spain where fish farming is perceived more positively. The main topics

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being questioned in the three countries are feed content and use of antibiotics and drugs, to a lesser extent fish welfare, while concerns are expressed about pollutants and controls.

After being shown basic information on aquaculture in eight slides, most participants declared they are satisfied to receive information, but did not consider it the same way. Asked to score the novelty of information from 1 (min) to 5 (max), compared to what they knew before, in Finland and Spain participants scored it from 3 to 5, with very high scores (4 and 5) frequently attributed, while in France the average scoring was lower (3 to 4), with rare score 5 and some very low (2 and 1). Beyond « novelty », some participants, especially in France and also in Finland, question the content of the discourse, as for reliability and style.

For the future, disseminating information to all public is unanimously accepted as good and necessary, because consumers want to have complete information and transparency. They call for information on a wide range of topics from farming conditions to regulation and fish health, and through many suggested channels. Credibility of information sources was discussed, without showing unanimous preferences for some sources. Some consumers in France and Spain mention that certification of farmed fish may bring overall reassurance and may reduce the need to search information from multiple sources.

Beyond the information needs, there are some ethical concerns expressed by some consumers, especially in France, about intensive fish farming. In the three countries, consumers made references to other sectors of animal production (cattle, poultry, pigs), and we noticed some common features with general trends about perception of agriculture production and food consumption.

Conclusion and perspectives

This first phase in our consumers' studies show that being brought information on aquaculture is seen positively in the three countries, on a wide range of subjects, but our results also unveil many questions and, from some participants, criticism about intensive fish farming.

The results of this qualitative work have been used to build a quantitative survey on a wide panel, whose results are under analysis.