ES/P011586/1 Corporate food retailers, meat supply chains and the responsibilities of tackling antimicrobial resistance (AMR)

Overview

This Pump Priming project explored the evolving responsibilities of corporate food retailers in tackling antimicrobial resistance in the context of their pig and chicken supply chains. Supermarket chains are a key set of actors strategically positioned to address the global challenge of reducing antibiotic use in food supply chains and raising consumer awareness as part of tackling AMR. The project addressed the role of retailers in navigating the AMR challenge through their overseas as well as their national store networks. Fieldwork for this project looked across supply chains from farmers, through veterinarians, to processors, manufacturers and policy makers, as well as retailers.

Project Description

This project makes a path-breaking contribution to the agenda for tackling antimicrobial resistance (AMR) by focusing scoping research and significant networking events on a link that has so far been missing from academic and policy debate - the pivotal role of corporate food retailers. The aim of the project is to address the responsibility of retailers in tackling the AMR challenge in the context of their chicken and pork supply chains, and to investigate this evolving role and how it might be shaped in the future, in the UK and at a global scale. Against a backdrop of decades of intensive farming of animals involving the use of antibiotics, it is becoming clearer that while antimicrobials are a necessary tool to maintain health and welfare on the farm, the key issue is their inappropriate and disproportionate use in animals thereby reducing availability for humans. There is food industry-wide concern that this is leading to growing resistance amongst certain bacteria such as Salmonella, Campylobacter and E-coli, placing pressure on the sector to develop and implement standards for more responsible use.

Supermarket chains are a key set of actors strategically positioned to address the global challenge of reducing antibiotic use in food supply chains and raising consumer awareness as part of tackling AMR. The project will address the role of retailers in navigating the AMR challenge through their overseas as well as their national store networks, and through supply chains that flow through spaces of the global South as well as the North. Specifically, the project addresses this role by proposing scoping research and dissemination events in the UK, where policy leadership is acknowledged and where corporate retail power is well-established. Driving the momentum of the project's policy engagement will be the support of the UK government's Food Standards Agency (FSA) as a Project Partner facilitating both a pre-project scoping workshop and a dissemination workshop at the end of the research. This reflects close alignment between the project's objectives and the emerging priorities of the FSA.

The objectives of the project are: (i) to map and model the current AMR challenge involving corporate food retailers through their chicken and pork supply chains; (ii) to evaluate current and evolving corporate retail strategies and standards in the UK for reducing antibiotic use in chicken and pork supply chains; (iii) to consider the role of consumer engagement in raising standards for responsible use of antibiotics in farming; and (iv) to facilitate increased dialogue between corporate food retailers and wider institutional policy and scientific networks in the UK, in order to shape future strategy for tackling AMR. These objectives will be met through four project phases conducted over eighteen months and involving both quantitative and qualitative methods that include: the mapping and modelling with trade data of the AMR problem facing UK corporate food retailers in their supply chains; interviews with retailers' food technologists and food standards policy-makers in the UK; and interviews with a sample of UK meat producers.

A project website, a stakeholder report and an end-of-project workshop in London will complement academic publications, in order to communicate the findings of the scoping research to non-academic beneficiaries and to shape evolving strategy regarding corporate food retailers' roles and responsibilities in tackling AMR.

Methodology

The research combined desk-based research with in-depth interviews with a range of companies and organizations working within meat supply networks. The desk-based research included: 1) a review of publicly available international, governmental and industry AMR policies and guidelines pertaining to pig and chicken meat supply networks; 2) a review of the social science AMR literature; 3) analysis of AMR coverage in the UK media; 4) experimental use of publicly available data to create dynamic maps within which UK retail purchases, UK supply networks, resistance figures for meat and carcasses in supplying countries (where available), and average antibiotic use in supply countries (where available) were plotted. The empirical research was conducted across two phases. In Phase One, we met with persons charged with developing, implementing and monitoring AMR policies for the major UK retailers. This included: interviews with nine of the UK top ten supermarkets, including seventeen people working as agricultural managers, technical directors, microbiologists, product safety and quality assurance directors and managers, and corporate responsibility and sustainability management; four interviews with nine people from eight industry bodies, including those tasked with developing, communicating or monitoring AMR related policies in practice; and consultations with seven staff from three policy-making bodies. In Phase Two, we extended our research across food networks and met meat processors, manufacturer representatives, farmers, trade bodies and others to further unpack how AMR emerges, is encountered, and is responded to at different nodes in food networks. This included: thirteen interviews with farmers via the Farm Business Survey; three interviews with processors including representatives working across production, health and welfare, research and development, and technical; two telephone meetings with two of the trade bodies for manufacturers; and three other meetings, including with representatives of a consultancy firm working across meat supply chains, and a campaigning organization; five conferences attended at which we met and interacted with people working on AMR across human and animal health, in industry, in policy and in academia. Across the project we conducted 44 formal interviews with 62 people from 38 organisations. These interviews included interviewees who were involved with two other industry bodies that we did not speak to separately.