

Lack of Regulation Leads to Complexity: A Case Study of the Free Range Chicken Meat Sector in the Western Cape, South Africa

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Abstract : Dominant approaches to livestock production are harmful to the environment, human health and animal welfare, yet global meat consumption is rising. Sustainable alternative production approaches are therefore urgently required, and 'free range' is the main alternative for chicken meat offered in South Africa (and globally). Although the South African Poultry Association provides non-binding guidelines, there is a lack of formal definition and regulation of free range chicken production, meaning it is unclear what this alternative entails and if it is consistently practised (a trend observed globally). The objective of this exploratory qualitative case study is therefore to investigate who and what determines free range chicken. The case study, conducted from a social constructivist worldview, uses semi-structured interviews, photographs and document analysis to collect data. Interviews are conducted with those involved with bringing free range chicken to the market - farmers, chefs, retailers, and regulators. Data is analysed using thematic analysis to establish dominant patterns in the data. The five major themes identified (based on prevalence in data and on achieving the research objective) are: 1) free range means a bird reared with good animal welfare in mind, 2) free range means quality meat, 3) free range means a profitable business, 4) free range is determined by decision makers or by access to markets, and 5) free range is coupled with concerns about the lack of regulation. Unpacking the findings in the context of the literature reveals who and what determines free range. The research uncovers wide-ranging interpretations of 'free range', driven by the absence of formal regulation for free range chicken practices and the lack of independent private certification. This means that the term 'free range' is socially constructed, thus varied and complex. The case study also shows that whether chicken meat is free range is generally determined by those who have access to markets. Large retailers claim adherence to the internationally recognised Five Freedoms, also include in the South African Poultry Association Code of Good Practice, which others in the sector say are too broad to be meaningful. Producers describe animal welfare concerns as the main driver for how they practice/view free range production, yet these interpretations vary. An additional driver is a focus on human health, which participants achieve mainly through the use of antibiotic-free feed, resulting in what participants regard as higher quality meat. The participants are also strongly driven by business imperatives, with most stating that free range chicken should carry a higher price than conventionally-reared chicken due to increased production costs. Recommendations from this study focus on, inter alia, a need to understand consumers' perspectives on free range chicken, given that those in the sector claim they are responding to consumer demand, and conducting environmental research such as life cycle assessment studies to establish the true (environmental) sustainability of free range production. At present, it seems the sector mostly responds to social sustainability: human health and animal welfare.

Keywords : chicken meat production, free range, socially constructed, sustainability

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