

The Prospects for Food Policy Councils in Portugal

An increasing number of cities are developing their food policy council, yet there are still many countries where this is not happening, or only just beginning. This article describes the development of an active national exchange platform in Portugal.

According to research done by Johns Hopkins University, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom are the countries with by far the highest number of food policy councils (FPCs) (1). Countries in Europe, such as Germany, also have an increasing number of food policy councils or are in the process of forming them. The specific context and reasons for this early emergence are beyond the scope of this contribution, but part of the explanation is a strong culture of civil society in general and of food movements in particular in these particular countries. A possible explanation can be found in the Eurobarometer “Europeans’ Engagement in Participatory Democracy” (2013), which shows that North European countries have in common a higher participation in non-governmental organisations or associations, compared with Portugal (33 %), which lies below the EU27 average (44 %). The extent to which the allotment garden movement contributed to this has not yet been sufficiently studied. However, we do know that the decades of the 1980s and 90s are of particular interest here, as during this period allotment garden movements were on the decline while food groups were on the rise (2).

The “Portuguese Non-profit Sector in Comparative Perspective” report (2008) gives an overview of those employed by civil society organisations as a percentage of the economically active population for 38 countries. Interestingly the leading countries, such as the Netherlands, Canada, and Belgium, have more urban agriculture and food groups or movements, while Southern European countries such as Portugal rank well below the average (3).

Southern European countries, including Portugal, have not fostered food policy councils for historical reasons and because of societal context. This raises the question of how to make food policy councils happen in countries where there is little or no urban agriculture, little tradition of food movements and where members do not participate very actively? The Portuguese initiative of establishing a national platform to share information and best practices among food systems actors is one way to promote food policy councils in urban and peri-urban areas.



Photo by Cecilia Delgado

Historical perspective

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Portugal was predominantly a rural society with 60 % of the workforce employed in the primary sector (Ferraz, 1975). Portugal’s relatively late industrialisation (partially due the period of dictatorship from 1933 until 1974), as well its neutrality during the Second World War, are part of the reason why formal allotment gardens were not part of municipal policy in the last century. Even Lisbon was surrounded by enough rural and cultivated land to provide food for the relatively few urban residents. However, the slow process of urbanisation began to accelerate in the 1980s, driven by Portugal’s entry to the European Union in 1986. This marks the start of the societal changes and new patterns of consumption in cities that constitute the frame for the expansion of urban agriculture and food systems in Portugal at the beginning of the 21st century, a sector which could be described as emergent today. So far however, no city has started a food policy council, either citizen or government driven.

Feeding Sustainable Cities

The national platform – Feeding Sustainable Cities (*Alimentar Cidades Sustentáveis*) – started in June 2018. Participation is free, but prospective members have to apply to join. The aim of the group is to disseminate news about relevant events and information and to share best practices among all the actors involved in the Portuguese food system. Before its creation, the lead coordinators carried out several activities, which included group labelling, setting up a discussion forum through the Google Groups platform, and an online survey of members’ priorities and expectations.

The group is dynamic and expanding weekly. It started with roughly 40 members and after 12 months it nearly had 270

members. During this first year over 350 topics were shared by group members. Results from the online survey (November 2018) show that members' priorities are:

1. Sharing national best practices
2. Dissemination of national events
3. Sharing international best practices
4. Extension of the network to other food actors
5. Face-to-face meetings and visits of initiatives
6. Building a resource centre
7. Group promotion via social media
8. Building a glossary
9. Production of online events

In order to develop these activities further a call for volunteers was made. At present nine volunteers are involved, including three coordinators, three women one of whom has a background in academia and NGO work, another in local government, and the third in central government.

A key accelerator of the city network in Portugal, was when the RUAF Partners met in Lisbon, in April 2018, and facilitated a working session "Urban Agriculture as a component of more resilient food systems" with selected Portuguese municipalities. After a day of sharing information on and experiences of national and international initiatives the willingness to further develop the network started. Barbara Emanuel, RUAF Partner from Toronto Department of Public Health, suggested starting a mailing list. The challenge to further develop the network was taken by the three coordinators mentioned above. A subsequent visit to Toronto in July 2018, and meetings with Lori Stahlbrand and Wayne Roberts, reinforced their understanding of the need to use communication and social media to put food and agriculture into the public agenda.

Although a relatively new group, Feeding Sustainable Cities can already draw lessons from the on-going Portuguese process:

- The process is facilitated and reinforced by external triggers – the working session with RUAF and Portuguese Municipalities, as well as the visit to Toronto, led to a public commitment to continuing open debate on food and agriculture, fuelled by different voices.
- It needs a lead group to make things happen, plus a community to make sense – with complementary skills and knowledge on the various aspects of what food entails.
- It is hard work – not only logistically, but especially providing the group with new and relevant information. Doing a biweekly best practice file or preparing face-to-face events are additional crucial tasks.
- There is a need to channel financial support and to have a permanent staff in order to ensure long-term continuity; now activities still rely on voluntary work.
- In order to ensure fair representation of actors and sectors a more systematic approach needs to be taken.



RUAF meeting at Fundação Gulbenkian in Lisbon, Portugal (2018).
Photo by Cecília Delgado

- Breaking the invisible glass wall of limited "member participation" and obtaining exposure, particularly from outside academics, is a continuous challenge for the coordination group. This work is being done through direct email contact, phone calls, or face-to-face meetings, all with the aim of increasing members' confidence and getting them to become more actively involved.

Lessons learned from the Portuguese platform show that food actors are willing to share information, best practices and to be better informed. Hopefully this will lead cities in Portugal to pave their own ways to setting up food policy councils. In the meantime, we would be very interested to know what other cities and countries are doing to fill the gap between informal processes and formalised food policy councils.

Cecília Delgado

CICS.NOVA, Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences at
Universidade Nova de Lisboa
ceciliadelgado@fcsh.unl.pt

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