

Challenges for building healthy food environment in an agricultural municipality in southern Brazil

Os desafios para a construção de ambientes alimentares saudáveis em um município agrícola no Sul do Brasil

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ABSTRACT

Objective

The aim of this paper is to review the challenges for the development of healthier food environments in Palmeira da Missões, in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

Methods

A qualitative approach was carried out with 29 participants. Data were produced through semi-structured interviews and the content was assessed by thematic categories.

Results

Three main difficulties were identified for the fostering of healthier food environments in the municipality: the disconnection between consumption and food production; the fragility in the food safety regulations and finally, the disconnection between public policies and local actions for food production.

Conclusion

The results allow to conclude that there are weaknesses concerning the food environments in Palmeira das Missões, which imply challenges for the fostering of healthy eating and, at the same time, a need for more effective articulation and local action.

Keywords: Feeding in the urban context. Health policies. Qualitative research.

RESUMO

Objetivo

Este trabalho analisou os desafios para a construção de ambientes alimentares mais saudáveis em Palmeira da Missões, no Rio Grande do Sul.

Métodos

Foi realizada uma pesquisa de abordagem qualitativa, que contou com a participação de 29 interlocutores. Os dados foram produzidos por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas as quais foram analisadas através da avaliação análise de conteúdo por categorias temáticas.

Resultados

Foram identificadas três principais dificuldades para a promoção de ambientes alimentares mais saudáveis no município: a desconexão entre consumo e produção de alimentos; a fragilidade na legislação higiênico-sanitária dos alimentos; e por último, a desarticulação entre políticas públicas e ações locais para a produção de alimentos.

Conclusão

Os resultados permitem concluir que há fragilidades em relação aos ambientes alimentares em Palmeira das Missões, os quais implicam desafios para a promoção da alimentação saudável e, ao mesmo tempo, necessidade de articulação e atuação local mais efetiva.

Palavras-chave: Alimentação no contexto urbano. Políticas de saúde. Pesquisa qualitativa.

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, the fostering of adequate and healthy food production has gained prominence in the discussion and implementation of public policies, considering that in Brazil there are several actions and programs aimed at the Food and Nutrition Security (FNS) of the population [1]. In order to implement the concepts set out in the *Lei Orgânica de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional* (Organic Law on Food and Nutrition Security) dated 2006, policies were developed to promote healthy foods access and consumption, such as the *Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar* (PNAE, National School Feeding Program) [2,3]. However, despite these advances, it should be noted that, in recent years, important setbacks have occurred in relation to these policies, as was the case, for example, with the reduction of funds for the *Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos* (PAA, Food Acquisition Program) [4] emblematic policy for the fostering of FNS in both rural and urban areas, and the extinction of the *Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional* (National Council for Food and Nutritional Security), extinct in 2019 [5].

On the other hand, the eating habits of the Brazilian population have also been changing and are marked by an increasing consumption of ultra-processed foods, a condition that bears consequences for health [1]. Borges et al. [6] explain that aspects in the food environment that favor the choice of ultra-processed foods, such as promotions, low prices and wide availability are barriers to the fostering of healthy eating. In the same sense, the taste of these foods, the convenience and ease of consumption and dependence are also factors for their preference [7].

According to Swinburn et al. [8], the food environment, capable of influencing people's food choices, can be divided into two dimensions: the macro environment and the microenvironment. The macro environment concerns global agrifood systems, agricultural policy, international food trade and global food distribution. The microenvironment, according to the authors, includes the spaces that group individuals and is divided into four categories: (i) physical, which is related to the food available in terms of access; (ii) economic, which includes food prices, economic policy, financial subsidies, taxation and the purchasing power of the population; (iii) policy, which concerns institutional rules and laws and; (iv) sociocultural, related to beliefs, attitudes, social norms and the value system of the population in relation, for example, to food.

For Castro [1], the fostering of adequate and healthy food consumption requires the consideration of different lines, in order to cover the structural changes in the Brazilian food system.

However, even though these changes are reflected in individuals, they are not strictly individual since they involve the consolidation of public food and nutrition policies. Such initiatives, according to the same author, require incentives for food and nutrition policies, reformulation of health regulations and the regulation of different elements of the food system, such as advertising and control of ultra-processed foods; these are aspects that, together, can, potentially provide a food environment that fosters a healthy and adequate eating.

In this connection, this article aims to review the challenges for the fostering of healthy eating in a municipality of Rio Grande do Sul characterized by extensive agricultural production.

METHODS

This is a qualitative approach investigation carried out between May and July 2019 in the urban area of Palmeira das Missões, which is located in the northern region of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Palmeira das Missões is a small town with about 34,000 inhabitants that stands out for its significant agricultural production, specifically focused on soybean [9,10].

A total of 29 interlocutors participated in the survey, 19 of them consumers (identified as Consumer 1 to 19), eight owners or representatives of food marketing establishments, including supermarkets, markets and family farming street markets, a local representative of food safety and nutritional policy⁴ and a health professional.

The survey started with consumers, based on the following criteria that diversified the participants: dwellers of different neighborhoods (downtown and suburbs); grantees and non-grantees of the *Programa Bolsa Família* (Bolsa Família Program); socioeconomic profile (income above and below the average of the municipality's population, which is 2.4 minimum wages) [11]. The socioeconomic analysis was carried out individually according to minimum wages income, comparing the family's income with the possibilities of physical and financial access to food outlets and food.

After initial contact with the first survey participants, the Snowball technique was applied, in which the first interlocutors indicated other participants, including family members, friends or neighbors [12]. Interviews were carried out until data saturation was reached in relation to the central questions, that is, when the answers began to be repeated, so that no new information was obtained [13].

The establishments that sell food were selected through the indication of the consumers participating in the investigation, who indicated the outlets where they customarily purchase their food products. These are establishments located both downtown and in the suburbs with different economic profiles, the municipal agriculture fair and the food outlets where farmers sell food on the street market and they were all included in the survey. The contact with these interlocutors took place in the establishments or other selling sites. Based on the data generated in the survey, the establishments were classified into four types: Type 1: Establishments located in the center of the city, in more central neighborhoods and accessed by medium or high income consumers; Type 2: Establishments near downtown and attended by middle or low income consumers; Type 3: Peripheral establishments accessed by low-income consumers, known as grocery stores; Type 4: Fair of family agriculture in the municipality that is set in a fixed location downtown. In the municipality there is only a fixed food market and some small food marketing sites, where farmers park their own cars and sell food, as described by Bueno et al. [14].

⁴ It was decided to identify the professional as a representative of the Food and Nutrition Security Policy to preserve the participant's anonymity.

For the production of qualitative data, interviews were carried out using a semi-structured script composed of the following central subjects: (a) in the case of consumers, aspects of food consumption, types of food consumed, food purchasing amount, perceptions of the food environment and in relation to the food consumed were addressed; (b) for those responsible for the establishments, the script addressed the type of food sold, variety, quality, availability, origin, contact with local production and with local farmers, supply, promotions and food demand, and marketing challenges; (c) in the case of the person in charge of the local food security policy and the health professional, informal conversations were held addressing local production, incentives for family farmers, availability of local food for sale and purchase; aspects related to access, consumption and consumers' health.

The interviews were recorded and later transcribed in their entirety. For the analysis of qualitative data, content analysis techniques were used with thematic categories [15]. The investigation was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (CAAE: 07729519.6.0000.5347, Protocol nº 3.183.819).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the interviewees' reports, three main subjects were reported related to the difficulties in promoting healthier eating environments in the municipality of Palmeira das Missões, which will be discussed in the following sections, namely: the disconnection between consumption and food production; the fragility of the hygienic-sanitary food legislation; and finally, disconnection between public policies and local initiatives for food production.

Consumers' disconnection with the source and seasonality of food

Bearing in mind that hegemonic food systems impact on the set up of food environments and these, in turn, put pressure on consumers' food choices [8], it is necessary to consider that the origin and seasonality of foods are characteristics that are often not contemplated for the choice and food consumption, a dynamic factor that contributes to the disconnection between production and consumption. The distancing of consumers from food production is also observed in the reports of this investigation, as consumers suggest that the production site or the source of food is not an aspect that determines the choice of food, as transcribed below:

This does not interfere [source of food], because the markets take a little from each place and they will not put a little sign stating where staples come from (Consumer 4).

Honestly, I never cared for it, I never paid attention, because here a good portion of the products comes from other regions, there are few that are produced here, I think, I never cared for it, I never really cared for it (Consumer 2).

It is important to emphasize that food produced close to consumers can be fresher and cause less environmental impact. Darolt et al. [16] emphasize that a closer food production brings benefits to farmers and consumers: for farmers it allows more autonomy, eliminates the need for intermediaries, ensures a fair price and reduces marketing losses. These factors show the potential of family farming for sustainable development and this is an important aspect considering that the municipality chosen in our study has an agricultural vocation. In relation to consumers, these alternatives can favor changes in eating habits, encourage taste re-education and more conscious consumption [16].

In addition, the consumption of local food allows creating a relationship of trust between producers and consumers, favoring access to better quality food at a fair price [17]. The consumption of local food is in line with what the Food Guide for the Brazilian population recommends, which encourages the consumption of fresh food as the basis of a healthy and adequate diet. The guidance provided by the guide, in addition to contributing to health, bears a positive impact on the environment, as it implies, even if indirectly, a more sustainable food system [18].

Weakness of hygienic-sanitary legislation for food processing and marketing

The process of regulating food for sale often constitutes a barrier, especially when it comes to family farming small-scale production. To start the product registration process, it is necessary, initially, to verify the main raw material that will be used in the processing, since the regulation goes through different instances, which are: the Ministry of Health, through the Sanitary Surveillance in the case of products of plant origin, the Municipal, State and Federal Inspection Services in the case of products of animal origin, and the *Ministério da Agricultura, Pecuária e Abastecimento* (Department of Agriculture, Livestock and Food Supply), in the case of beverages [19].

In this connection, considering the complexities of health legislation and the registration and inspection of food and beverages instances, it is observed that commercial outlets' managers have problems understanding those rules, as observed in the interview excerpt, related to the sale of food by family agro-industries:

You have to be registered, if it's in the SIM [Municipal Inspection Service] you can only sell in the municipality; you must have the SIF [Federal Inspection Service] registration to sell from one municipality to the other so we are cautious, for example, cookies there in Sarandi only have a SIM label; hence you cannot sell those cookies here [Palmeira das Missões] (Establishment category 1).

In this case, there is a lack of information regarding the food legislation and the hygienic-sanitary regulation, since the cookies mentioned by the above respondent is a plant source food, which can be sold in other municipalities, since the restriction to municipalities or states refers only to products of animal origin, and not to the registration linked to the Sanitary Surveillance Service. Faced with this confusion surrounding the legislation, food produced in nearby municipalities is not allowed to be marketed and accessed by consumers.

In addition to this obstacle in relation to legislation and regularization, the process of formalizing family agro-industries is a difficult process that involves steps in the sanitary, environmental and tax/fiscal spheres and that, to a certain extent, produces the exclusion of producers from family agriculture due to the high necessary investments:

Because today to produce honey, lard, cheese, he will have to legalize it, it has an extra cost, the legislation does not allow buying a grandmother-made cheese, even if it is a good quality cheese; today if she continues to sell that cheese she will have to legalize it, pay a fee, an inspection by the Municipal Inspection Service, the SIM, so it generates an extra cost (Representative of Food Safety Department).

As to the distribution outlets, their owners pointed out the importance of selling products with no risk of contamination. This aspect is evidenced in the following excerpt from the interview: "it must have a bar code, nutritional information, it must be registered [Establishment Type 1]". This statement implies that even though there is a consumer demand for small farmers' products, these products are not available, which is justified by the fact that, as explained by one of the interviewees, [if the inspection] *find them on the shelf, they will* [Establishment Type 1].

Issues associated with the lack of local initiatives were also listed, as suggested by the following interview excerpt:

We were unable to envision an agroindustry for cheese, for salami and a little bit also the vision of the municipality that also does not have priority to invest in small agroindustries to generate taxes for the municipality and also improve the quality of life of these small farmers (Local representative of politics).

The lack of local actions aimed at regulating local food implies little progress towards the inclusion of family farmers in the markets and, consequently, less availability of food produced in local food systems.

Faced with this scenario, Castro [1] considers essential to review the health regulations, in order to include family farming producers. From this perspective, there has been some progress, such as, for example, the *Resolução da Diretoria Colegiada* (RDC, Resolution of the Collegiate Board) nº 49, dated 2013, that, among other advances, proposes an expanded dialogue between health surveillance and FNS principles, in a proposal that broadens the vision of health [20]. However, even if there have been advances in regulatory standards for food production by family farmers, such changes are still insufficient to contribute to the formalization and entry into formal markets [21].

In 2017, RDC nº 153/2017 was enacted [22]. This regulation, which aims to simplify procedures aimed at small-scale production, represents an advance in relation to RDC nº 49, 2013. This advance is related to the proposed classification of productive activities according to the risk involved in production. Thus, activities are classified as high or low health risk. Among the activities carried out by family farmers, most were classified as low risk, which simplifies the issuance of the health license [23]. Still along this line, in 2017, Anvisa instituted the *Programa para Inclusão Produtiva e Segurança Sanitária* (Program for Productive Inclusion and Health Security), aimed at improving the performance of health surveillance in rural family enterprises [24]. There are, therefore, advances in relation to the production, processing and commercialization of food on a family farm scale. Despite these advances, it is still necessary to strengthen and integrate these actions and policies.

Disconnection between public policies and local actions for food production

Another aspect that involves food availability, access and consumption is the political dimension. A barrier found for food production in the Municipality is linked to local politics which, as empirical data suggest, do little to encourage family farming and the production of healthy foods to supply local markets and consumption; at the same time production of commodities is overvalued. These aspects are depicted in the interview excerpts below:

A little is due to the political vision, Palmeira is characterized by medium and large rural properties [...]. So, the small farmer is left a little aside, he is not given the chance [...] it will not generate income, a large yield of the ICMS tax, so it is left aside, the social side is not considered. With a project like that, you are benefiting 30, 40 families, right? [...] so it is a management problem, regardless of the party administering the municipality (Local political representative).

Regarding public food policies, currently, even though the municipality has been reaching and exceeding the minimum percentage of 30% of purchases from family farmers as required by the PNAE – in 2017 it was around 49% – there are few local producers that sell food to the PNAE, and the sale is restricted basically to vegetables [25]. The other products are purchased from other municipalities and cooperatives in the region:

There are these two linked agro-industries that deliver to the PNAE, there are three or four of the street market sellers who deliver to the PNAE [...] Street market products [vegetables], also because of the issue of supply, which occurs fortnightly, so it is not feasible to bring products from other regions; therefore these companies located outside the municipality supply grape juice, oranges, meat, cheese. These agro-industries, sometimes use a cooperative to supply salamis and sausages, there is a gentlemen's agreement that they will supply the products that the municipality cannot supply, so they leave aside the street marketers; the street marketers of the municipality supply all this part [vegetables], while agroindustries are absent (Local political representative).

Problems were also experienced for the implementation of the PAA in the municipality, reflecting the lack of articulated and intersectoral initiatives among the professionals who work in the implementation of these policies in the municipality, as highlighted in the following excerpt:

PAA [in 2018] brought a project of 130 thousand reais for the municipality; we got a producer, our job was to get a producer with the products, we got up to 80 thousand reais of the product[...] it was that simultaneous donation, which was for the Centro de Referência de Assistência Social (CRAS Social Assistance Reference Center), CRAS to define which families would receive the food basket and the secretary of agriculture would operate the whole process; however, there was no link between the secretariats to put the PAA into practice and then nothing came out of it, and the producers are pressing me (Local political representative).

The interview's excerpt above demonstrates a poor articulation between the different sectors to encourage the local food supply, and the improvement of access to food by the low purchasing power consumers residing in the municipality. Such aspects weaken the operationalization of the PAA and PNAE, policies that, in addition to targeting vulnerable people or school meals, promote local development and the appreciation of local family farmers [26,27]. In addition, they can contribute to developing more sustainable and healthy food systems and food setting.

On the other hand, cultural issues also favor the production of grains in the municipality, even if on a small scale, an aspect that links the local context to the current agro-food system. In this connection, one of the street market sellers explained that producers who make the decision to produce food such as horticultural products instead of grains will be culturally isolated, generating, to a certain extent, the exclusion of these producers from the social and cultural setting:

It's the cultural issue too, when the farmer goes and is the only one producing fruits and vegetables, he goes to the community or in the Italian culture issue, he goes there to the church and will hear the other producers talking about what, everyone will be talking that is about soy and he wants to talk about vegetables, so he is culturally isolated (Street market seller).

In view of this, even if the property characteristics are unfavorable for the production of grains like soybeans, farmers persist in the cultivation of grain crops, as stated below:

As much as the land, the size of properties does not support grain farming, the workforce does not support the grains, the machinery does not support the grains, the farmer will produce grains, because everyone is producing grains (Street market stallholder).

In this connection, it is more advantageous for family farmers to produce grains such as soy, even on small farms. In fact, the production of grains, unlike fruits and vegetables, has market guarantees, a factor that generates security for the producer, as explained by the following statement by the farmer: *if you produce soybeans, you are sure you will receive the money*. This security in relation to the commercialization of other foods does not occur in the municipality, since no organization

of the production chain is available and those who produce, produce in small quantities and cannot access markets for commercialization, because they produce insufficient quantities for a permanent supply.

Given this scenario and in line with Ribeiro Junior's arguments [28], it is important that the municipality, besides encouraging public policies at the national level such as the PNAE and PAA, also strengthen and encourage family-based agriculture, production, supply and consumption of local and regional foods. Such initiatives may help to make healthier and more adequate food available, also contributing to the improvement of the local food setting. Finally, it should be noted that this survey intended to assess only the challenges for the fostering of healthier food environments in the municipality, leaving a gap. Thus, we suggest that further and complementary studies review the potential of the municipality to promote healthier food settings.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this article, which aimed to review the challenges for the development of healthier food environments in Palmeira das Missões, it was found that the challenge is associated with the consumers' abandonment of locally produced food.

Gaps that make the formalization of family agro-industries unfeasible were also observed. Although there are many obstacles associated with bureaucratic processes and hygienic-sanitary requirements, there are also difficulties in understanding the legislation on the part of those in charge of the marketing establishments and especially those responsible for local policies. In addition, in relation to local policy initiatives, we face the appreciation of large-scale grain produced by conventional agriculture that reflects the global food system.

In this scenario, municipalities' initiatives are essential, since, in general, there is a need to diversify local production to promote FNS and healthy food systems.

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CONTRIBUTORS

MC BUENO contributed to the conception and design, data collection, review and interpretation of data, review and approval of the final version. ENF RUIZ contributed to the conception and design, analysis and interpretation of data, review and approval of the final version of the manuscript. FT CRUZ contributed to the conception and design, review and interpretation of data, review and approval of the final version.