

# Educating to eat and eating to educate: the process of articulating and understanding the practice of intersectorality between education and food and nutritional security policies

Educar para o comer e o comer para educar: o processo de articulação e compreensão da prática da intersectorialidade entre as políticas de educação e de segurança alimentar e nutricional

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O presente estudo analisa as conferências de SAN enquanto um mecanismo participativo de construção da ação pública, de forma a observar e compreender esses processos políticos na área de alimentação e nutrição. Parte-se do pressuposto de que as conferências de SAN assumem um papel ímpar no aprimoramento da ação pública para transformação dos sistemas alimentares.

## Abstract

Food and education policies are strategic agendas for analyzing processes of democratic coordination and intersectorality, as they require integrated and regionalized approaches. The National School Feeding Program (PNAE – acronym in Portuguese) is characterized as the longest-running public policy in Brazil in the area of food and nutrition security (FNS), and the practice of intersectorality has become an essential element in implementing its guidelines. The objective of this study was to observe and understand how participatory political processes and coordination between sectors can play a role in improving public action to transform food systems. The methodology was based on a documentary analysis of materials related to the process of developing *Plano Estadual de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional do Estado de São Paulo* (PLANSAN/SP), allowing for the reconstruction of the political process and the identification of intersectoral practices. The results highlight the importance of social participation and intersectorality in the formulation of public policies, with an emphasis

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on the integration between education and FNS. By observing the elements of intersection, the research revealed that food and nutrition education and the school food environment are key elements for promoting healthy and sustainable food systems. It is concluded that intersectoral practice is essential to overcome complex challenges and to ensure the effectiveness of FNS policies.

**Keywords:** Food and Nutrition Security; National School Feeding Program; Intersectorality; Food and Nutrition Education; Social Participation.

## Resumo

As políticas de alimentação e educação são agendas estratégicas para analisar processos de articulação democrática e intersectorialidade, já que necessitam de visões integradas e regionalizadas. O Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar (PNAE) caracteriza-se como a política pública de maior longevidade do país na área de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional (SAN) e a prática da intersectorialidade tornou-se um elemento essencial para concretizar suas diretrizes. O objetivo deste estudo foi observar e compreender como processos políticos participativos e articulação entre setores podem assumir um papel no aprimoramento da ação pública para transformação dos sistemas alimentares. A metodologia baseou-se na análise documental dos materiais relacionados ao processo de construção do Plano Estadual de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional do Estado de São Paulo (PLANSAN/SP), permitindo a reconstrução do processo político e a identificação de práticas intersectoriais. Os resultados destacam a importância da participação social e da intersectorialidade na formulação de políticas públicas, com ênfase na integração entre educação e SAN. Ao observar os elementos de intersecção entre essas políticas, a pesquisa revelou que educação alimentar e nutricional e ambiente alimentar escolar são elementos-chave para a promoção de sistemas alimentares saudáveis e sustentáveis. Conclui-se que a prática intersectorial é essencial para superar desafios complexos e garantir a efetividade das políticas de SAN e adequação do PNAE.

**Palavras-chave:** Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional; Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar; Intersectorialidade; Educação Alimentar e Nutricional; Participação Social.

## Introduction

This study discusses the political processes and challenges in intersectoral practice between the education sector and the Food and Nutrition Security (FNS) policy, based on an analysis of the development of the São Paulo State Food and Nutrition Security Plan (PLANSAN/SP).

By establishing the National Food and Nutrition Security System (SISAN), the Organic Law on Food and Nutrition Security (LOSAN) recognizes that complex challenges, such as ensuring FNS, require the reconciliation of different perspectives and the organization of interests within an integrated system (Brasil, 2006). Accordingly, addressing the several malnutrition forms requires developing and implementing policies and programs that understand and address food system changes (Popkin; Corvalan; Grummer-Strawn, 2020). The complex and multidimensional nature of these systems make territorialization, intersectorality, and social participation essential elements of such policies (Hawkes et al., 2016).

The National School Feeding Program (PNAE) is considered Brazil's longest-standing public policy in FNS (Peixinho, 2013). Since the First National Conference on Food and Nutrition Security, it has been a priority pillar of the National FNS Policy (PNSAN) (Brasil, 1995). To address the challenge of territorialization, the program formalizes the decentralization of its management by transferring resources and responsibilities to states and municipalities. To incorporate social participation, it establishes social oversight through the School Feeding Council (CAE), which is responsible for monitoring and overseeing program implementation and has become a prerequisite for the transfer of program funds (Brasil, 1994).

The PNAE was further strengthened by the enactment of Law N°11.947 of June 16, 2009, which resulted from an intensive intersectoral process led by the federal government, with broad civil society participation through the Food and Nutrition Security Council (CONSEA) (Peixinho, 2013). The law incorporated the following principles into school feeding management and implementation: equity, social participation, universality, sustainability/continuity, shared responsibility, the Human Right

to Adequate Food (DHAA), and respect for regional eating habits and traditions (Brasil, 2009). Among the provisions of Law N°11.947 that promote healthy and sustainable food systems while respecting the ethnic and racial diversity, culture, and traditions of the Brazilian population are the requirements that menus prioritize staple foods, respect local food culture and traditions, be grounded in sustainability and regional agricultural diversification, and allocate at least 30% of the financial resources transferred by the Federal Government to the purchase of products from family farming (Brasil, 2009).

This provision encourages resilient agricultural practices that preserve ecosystems, strengthen adaptive capacity in response to climate change, and improve land and soil quality (Slater, 2017). In this context, intersectoral practice at the local program implementation level, with the participation of the education sector in CONSEA and the Intersecretarial Chamber of Food and Nutrition Security (CAISAN), became essential for operationalizing purchases from family farming and ensuring access to locally produced foods aligned with the eating habits, histories, and food cultures of each territory. By purchasing directly from family farmers, the program was recognized as an instrument for driving local economies (Schwartzman et al., 2017).

Given this trajectory, the PNAE can be said to play a central role in the Promotion of Adequate and Healthy Eating (PAAS) and in fostering positive transformations in food systems. Compliance with PNAE guidelines requires coordination with FNS policies through democratic intersectoral processes, which represents both a major opportunity and a major challenge. Furthermore, understanding decentralized intersectoral processes is crucial for strengthening democracy, and this perspective was the primary inspiration for the present study.

### **Decentralization and intersectorality: pillars of public policy development**

Public policy analysis provides essential elements for understanding both the current challenges of the political world and the ways of addressing them (Oliveira et al., 2021). One major political challenge is the decentralization of public

policies, which has profoundly transformed public action, led to the rise of regional and metropolitan authorities, and reshaped power relations (Epstein, 2021). This territorialization process mobilizes multiple institutions and stakeholders in the formulation and implementation of public policies and, consequently, produces changes in policy analysis. Questions concerning how local stakeholders become involved in public action processes and how they develop local solutions articulated with their contexts, therefore, become central (Epstein, 2021).

Few studies have examined political processes in food and nutrition (Hawkes et al., 2016). However, food and education policies are strategic forms of public action for analyzing democratic, regional, and intersectoral coordination processes because of their multidimensional nature and the need for integrated and regionalized approaches. These characteristics reinforce the need to expand civil society participation in the formulation, implementation, and oversight of these policies at all levels, particularly at the local level (Maluf; Menezes; Valente, 1996).

To serve the population comprehensively, public action must draw on knowledge and the public interest in coordinated fashion (Schutz; Miotto, 2010). Intersectorality is a means of implementing integrated public policies because it connects the knowledge, resources, capabilities, talents, and potential of individuals and social organizations, thereby overcoming fragmented knowledge and structures. More than a concept, it is a social practice that supports efforts to overcome complex problems in public action (Mendes; Akerman, 2007). This approach promotes dialogue, convergence of interests, and the development of collective solutions, in order to promote equity and address social exclusion (Akerman et al., 2014). Moreover, ideas must be transformed into feasible actions, enabling social demands to materialize as effective public policies (Schutz; Miotto, 2010; Mendes; Akerman, 2007).

However, the involvement of multiple stakeholders in identifying and analyzing their problems and developing solutions often poses complex challenges for territories (Burity et al., 2010; Epstein, 2021). Intersectorality is, therefore, a

demanding proposition that requires commitment from managers and the development of instruments that give concrete form to this integration (Mendes; Akerman, 2007). It may be implemented in several ways, but it depends on the contribution and coordination of each sector involved (Schutz; Miotto, 2010). This coordination is structured through government systems designed to enable such integration, targeted and/or structural projects, and the creation of spaces for dialogue among the various stakeholders involved (Mendes; Akerman, 2007).

Understanding these spaces of collective development and contestation, their fragmentation, and the elements that promote intersectorality and social participation is a major challenge. Public action sociology provides an important analytical framework for understanding the dynamics of policy formulation and implementation. Its approach pays particular attention to the stakeholders involved, highlighting elements such as the role of ideas, knowledge, institutions, interests, instruments, individuals, and gender issues in the policy development process (Oliveira et al., 2021). This entails examining the microcosm in which a policy is produced and recognizing that policies result from interactions. After all, a policy stems from relationships among differentiated social spaces in which agents shape their perspectives according to their membership in specific fields (Dubois, 2021).

This study analyzes FNS conferences as a participatory mechanism for developing public action in order to observe and understand these political processes in food and nutrition. It assumes that FNS conferences and the development of a food and nutrition security plan play a unique role in improving public action to transform food systems and promote intersectorality.

## Methods

This qualitative study aimed to assemble a set of elements to support an analysis of intersectoral practice and the intersection of public policies through a documentary analysis of the PLANSAN/SP development process. Documentary analysis enables the creation of new ways of understanding event and, complementarily, provides insight into how they have developed (Sá-Silva; Almeida;

Guindani, 2009). It also makes it possible to reconstruct processes. The document serves as testimony to activities that occurred at another point in time and enables a longitudinal view of the process under study (Cellard, 2012).

The PLANSAN/SP was developed from 2015 to 2018 through multiple stages of social participation conducted by CONSEA/SP members and public officials, with support and documentation provided by scholars from São Paulo State University Júlio de Mesquita Filho (UNESP).

Records and reports from this development process were available on the platform of the Network for the Defense and Promotion of Healthy, Adequate, and Solidarity-Based Food (REDESANS) (Redesans, 2021). The platform was accessed on February 26, 2023 and contained 170 available documents, which comprised part of the empirical material analyzed in this study. Digital copies of all documents available on that date were made and archived, followed by subsequent reading in order to familiarize with the content and categorize and analyze it.

This study compiled a highly heterogeneous set of materials available on the REDESANS platform, reflecting the concern not to restrict the analysis to official government documents. Documents from several sources and in different formats that recorded the process under study were analyzed. The materials included official minutes of CONSEA/SP, Technical Committee, and CAISAN meetings, presentations, stakeholder records, conference reports, and other documents.

The first stage of document selection consisted of distinguishing between documents that were and were not part of the PLANSAN/SP development process. After this separation, documents that referred in some way to the PLANSAN/SP development process were forwarded to the systematization stage. In total, 37 documents (21.8%) were selected for the study, whereas 133 documents (78.2%) were excluded because they did not meet the established inclusion criteria.

During systematization, a reading form was prepared for each document and included the document name, electronic access address, creation date, author/source, and a description of references related to basic education. According to the

National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (LDB), school education is education that “occurs predominantly through teaching in dedicated institutions.” Basic education, in turn, is organized into three stages: preschool, elementary school, and high school, and is compulsory and free for children and adolescents aged 4 (four) to 17 (seventeen) years (Brasil, 2018). References related to basic education were selected to enable a more precise interpretation of data that contained references to school feeding policies and to the involvement of education agencies in FNS policies.

The empirical materials were organized chronologically according to the previously examined stages of plan development, resulting in a timeline of these documents (Figure 1). Organizing the documents over time allowed linking the meaning and context of references related to basic

education, facilitating a social understanding of how positions and concepts evolved throughout the plan’s development. This organization gave rise to the analytical themes presented in this article.

## Results and Discussion

The documentary analysis brought concrete elements of the formulation of public action to light, allowing us to affirm that developing the PLANSA/SP served as an excellent field for investigating the complex political process of coordination between FNS and education. The analysis also enabled an understanding of the intricacies of intersectoral practice by highlighting the main intersections between these two policies, the interests of the stakeholders involved, and the organizational dynamics that permeated the process.

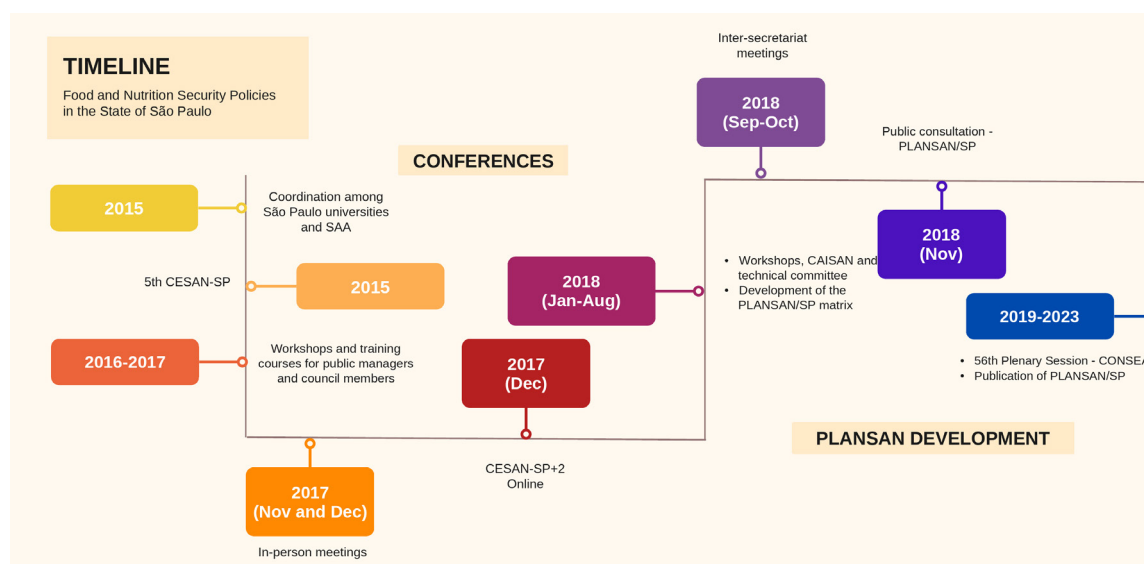


Figure 1 – Timeline of the development of PLANSA/SP

### Structural elements of the intersectoral political process: a space for coordinating knowledge in the development of solutions

The intersectoral political process is characterized by the integration of actions and knowledge to formulate public policies that address diverse realities, enabling the analysis of local problems

and the development of jointly agreed strategies to address them. To address the multidimensionality and complexity of food systems, food and nutrition policies require integrated intersectoral actions that reinforce and amplify one another by moving in the same direction.

The first prominent element of this political process was the agreement established between the Ministry of Social Development (MDS) and UNESP

to provide technical support for the development of the PLANSAN/SP and to mobilize CAISAN. It enabled efficient data consolidation by mobilizing society around the debate and structuring its contributions. It also involved government technical staff with the expertise to analyze the determinants of FNS, which enabled the integration and consolidation of conference results with the state's strategic actions and helped overcome the challenge of coordinating knowledge.

To understand this coordination of knowledge and the participation of several stakeholders (managers, farmers, nutritionists, agronomists, scholars, among others) in the policy formulation process, their contributions related to the education sector were recorded in conference debates, negotiations, final conference proposals (agreements reached), and the actions and targets of the PLANSAN/SP. Mapping the path followed by these contributions at each stage of the development process showed that 84% of the stakeholders' contributions arising from the debate and consensus-building stages were incorporated into the plan's targets and actions. This finding indicates that, even under state mediation, the public interest was considered in the decision-making process, thereby altering the power relationship to some extent.

### **Actions at the intersection of education and FNS**

The broad diversity and large number of education-related actions discussed during the PLANSAN/SP development process allowed observing the cross-cutting role of the education sector in FNS policy. This interconnection makes explicit and reinforces the need for these policies to be addressed in an integrated manner, as indicated in the literature.

These proposals for education-related public actions permeated FNS policy not only in debates concerning food and nutrition education strategies and regulatory measures, but also in debates surrounding nearly all other strategies in the framework of the 2016-2019 National Plan, which guided the PLANSAN/SP development process. This shows the diverse intersections between these policies and reinforces the relevance of the education sector to FNS policy.

When the diversity of FNS actions related to the education sector was organized, the intersection of these policies could be grouped into two key concepts: Food and Nutrition Education (FNE) and the Food Environment, both aimed at ensuring the DHAA. A feedback loop between these pillars is noteworthy: the environment educates people about eating by providing adequate and healthy foods, whereas education raises awareness and therefore generates demand for environmental transformations that meet the informed consumer's desire to eat adequately.

### **FNE as a field of action in health, education, and food and nutrition security**

FNE is a field of action within FNS that contributes to the realization of the population's DHAA and is also a crucial health promotion strategy. FNE strategies must be appropriate to the population's socioeconomic and cultural reality (Brasil, 2012). It is, therefore, highly promising for this debate to be incorporated into the development of regional FNS plans.

FNE strategies for health promotion were frequently mentioned during the plan's development, indicating that the social stakeholders who participated in the PLANSAN/SP development process identified schools as essential settings for health promotion, primarily because they can educate citizens to make informed food choices through FNE. References to this subject in the documents expressed concern about the increasing consumption of ultra-processed products and indicated the need to expand the Health at School Program (PSE) actions in the state. The small number of nutritionists in both the health and education sectors was identified as a constraint on the implementation of these actions.

Another frequently mentioned aspect of FNE was its integrated approach to the several dimensions of a healthy and sustainable food system. According to the FNE Framework, for FNE actions to develop critical awareness regarding eating, they must address themes and strategies related to all dimensions of a healthy and sustainable food system, including access to land, water, and the

means of production; food processing methods; individual and collective consumption practices; and waste generation and disposal. Consistent with this evidence, references to FNE associated with food systems in the documents encompassed actions related to agroecology education, gardens, the full use of foods, proper waste disposal, conscious consumption, and other practices.

A specific target was included in the PLANSAN/SP for implementing an agroecology education program for farmers, technical staff, managers, and/or researchers in the state's regional rural technical assistance offices. School gardens were widely cited in this category as substantial educational tools for restoring the connection among consumers, food, and nature and overcoming the alienation from knowledge about production processes caused by food industrialization. This reinforces concepts in the literature indicating that CONSEA and CAISAN are fertile spaces for developing educational garden programs that require intersectoral actions to be effective (Schwartzman et al., 2017; Brasil, 2012).

The approach to FNE from the perspective of food culture was also cited in the documents, emphasizing that one of FNE's main contributions to FNS policies is valuing the different expressions of food culture and strengthening regional eating practices. References in the documents to FNE actions that value and recover food culture concerned the need to address food history, traditions and regional foods, culinary practices, and other aspects. Finally, a target was included in the PLANSAN/SP for educational and social communication actions across all media, public libraries, and cultural events, in order to value the state's diverse food cultures. It also provides for the creation of a participatory forum with annual meetings to discuss the social, cultural, and environmental value of food, thereby strengthening Food Sovereignty as an essential mechanism in this context.

Undoubtedly, FNE is a cross-cutting theme in the basic education curriculum under the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (Brasil, 2018). Food- and nutrition-related topics are connected to various contents already included in curricular components, and these themes must be correlated through a cross-cutting and multidisciplinary approach planned and structured

within a continuous pedagogical pathway throughout all stages of the educational process (Brasil, 2018; Maldonado et al., 2022). Curricular food and nutrition education, which permeates the teaching and learning process, was another aspect of FNE cited during the PLANSAN/SP development process. At the conferences, for example, proposals from locations such as Bauru, Ribeirão Preto, Santos, Franca, and Sorocaba sought to include FNE in the curriculum.

Debates on this subject during the plan's development also pointed to the need to establish an appropriate and formally constituted social space for the methodological structuring of pedagogical FNE actions, thereby enabling the integration of stakeholders and the coordination of knowledge.

The development of the PLANSAN/SP proved to be a promising field for creating FNE strategies that engage with territorial contexts and develop students' critical awareness of the impact of food choices on health, society, and the environment. FNS debates concerning FNE reinforce the need to train social stakeholders, strengthen existing programs such as the PSE, and structure FNE actions as curriculum-linked learning pathways that prepare students to make informed decisions about their food. These actions promote autonomy and the ability to ensure their own food and nutrition security by choosing quality foods that meet their nutritional needs and promote health, well-being, and sustainability.

Another highly important aspect of FNE mentioned in the documents is the training of social stakeholders who may be involved in FNE activities. Social stakeholders possess extensive knowledge about adequate and healthy eating; however, in many cases, they lack a formally written or developed concept (Burity et al., 2010). Various social stakeholders, including school cooks, farmers, nutritionists, council members, and other professionals, conduct FNE actions. References to this subject during the plan's development indicated the need to train and involve stakeholders from the school community, strengthening them as active agents in FNE actions and promoting spaces for the exchange and coordination of knowledge.

## Schools that promote healthy and sustainable food environments

A healthy school food environment is recognized as essential to the effectiveness of FNE actions. Individuals' power and autonomy to make choices are strongly influenced by the available food options and food marketing (Hawkes et al., 2020). FNE actions can have lasting effects only when embedded in a healthy and sustainable food system that enables such choices (Bezerra, 2018). During the PLANSAN/SP development process, numerous debates and proposals for actions addressing the school food environment to ensure FNS were presented, particularly within the scope of public procurement. These included discussions on the need to strengthen such procurement and on the main obstacles and challenges affecting the effectiveness of purchases from family farming, reinforcing concepts in the existing literature that identify intersectoral practice as a substantial element in overcoming these challenges.

The debate on family farming and the PNAE during the development of the PLANSAN/SP pointed to the need for transparency in the publication of public calls for procurement, as well as improved oversight, monitoring, and accountability for purchases. The importance of better communication between farmers and responsible agencies and the need to streamline bureaucratic procedures in order to encourage producers' participation in the program were also highlighted. The lack of planning and advance procurement provisions was also identified as an obstacle that has created difficulties for farmers and discouraged them from remaining in rural areas. To address these demands, the PLANSAN/SP established a target whereby one of the annual meetings of the state's Regional FNS Commissions (CRSANS) would be used to evaluate and improve public procurement notices. The target also provides for the regionalization of public school menus and the monitoring of PNAE purchases from family farming through indicators included in the plan.

The PNAE's purchase of agroecological products from family farming that respect ethnic and racial diversity and the traditions of the Brazilian population and originate from resilient agricultural

practices is crucial to maintain ecosystems. These practices strengthen adaptive capacity in response to climate change, improve land and soil quality, and contribute to the promotion of healthy and sustainable food systems (Slater, 2017). This association between family farming and organic and agroecological production was widely discussed during the development of the PLANSAN/SP.

The main measures proposed to advance in this direction were encouraging organic and agroecological procurement, monitoring pesticide residues in foods used in school meals, providing rural technical assistance for the agroecological transition, and improving the dissemination of the concept of agroecology among consumers, students, farmers, and public managers. Replacing ultra-processed foods with fresh and minimally processed foods in the PNAE was also cited as a proposal for promoting healthy and sustainable food environments.

A final aspect related to the food environment addressed during the plan's development was the need for regulations in the state of São Paulo restricting the sale and advertising of ultra-processed products in public and private schools to protect children and adolescents. Ensuring the DHAA requires regulatory measures to curb advertising that promotes the consumption of unhealthy foods or "sells" nonexistent or false attributes, particularly to children and young people (Burity et al., 2010). This is the life stage where some eating habits are developed and established, and this population is especially vulnerable to this type of exposure (Hawkes et al., 2020). Regulating the operation of school cafeterias in public and private school systems was included as a plan target and may be considered an essential measure for protecting children and adolescents from exposure to the availability and advertising of ultra-processed food products at school.

An appropriate school food environment is vital for ensuring that FNE actions are coherent, making the provision of healthy and sustainable foods a vital element in promoting adequate eating practices. The development of a Food and Nutrition Security Plan provided a highly appropriate social space for building actions that promote agroecology and public procurement from family farming for the

PNAE. It brought public managers and civil society organizations involved in food production together to discuss the challenges faced by each sector and develop joint, feasible solutions so that the PNAE can serve as a catalyst for positive transformations in food systems.

## Final considerations

This study allowed examining the political development of the PLANSAN/SP from the perspective of basic education and to identify the various actions at the intersection of these policies. Understanding these democratic processes is critically important for advancing the maturity of our democracy and, consequently, strengthening, fostering, and protecting it in the face of the highly threatening context currently experienced in Brazil.

Intersectoral practice, combined with democratic participation, proved indispensable for overcoming complex challenges, such as integrating the PNAE with family farming. The actions identified included greater transparency, oversight, and monitoring of public purchases from family farming, as well as streamlined bureaucratic procedures. The program can promote positive transformations in food systems, connect the health, social development, education, and agriculture sectors, and address the several forms of malnutrition through the promotion of FNE combined with the provision of healthy and sustainable foods.

The plural and consistent debates and proposals converted into actions in the PLANSAN/SP indicate that the development process consolidated spaces for social mobilization, qualified listening, and the coordination of knowledge. These spaces were made possible by the university's technical support for including diverse stakeholders and by the participation of government technical staff from different sectors. This organization of the PLANSAN/SP development process integrated society's demands into the government's strategic actions and contributed to creating more efficient solutions connected to local realities.

Despite the robust development process and the inclusion of indicators that support the monitoring of PLANSAN/SP implementation, its effective implementation depends on the creation

of enforceability mechanisms and transparent monitoring methods to ensure that the proposed actions are conducted.

Finally, the study concludes that spaces such as CONSEA and CAISAN are fundamental for mobilizing different sectors and integrating knowledge, thereby promoting more feasible public policies connected to territorial needs. The development of regional FNS plans, such as the PLANSAN/SP, represents an opportunity to strengthen democracy and promote the transition toward healthier and more sustainable food systems, contributing to ensuring the DHAA and promoting social equity.

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Giorgia Castilho Russo: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing, and final approval. Cristiane Cabral: formal analysis, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing, and final approval. Larissa Baraldi: formal analysis, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing, and final approval. Luiza Delazari Borges: writing – review & editing and final approval. Betzabeth Slater: conceptualization, supervision, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing, and final approval.

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