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***Theme 3***

***ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF PLANNING FOOD SYSTEMS: THE CASE OF BAIXO VOUGA.***

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The concept of Local Food Systems (LFS) is gaining considerable visibility at both political and academic levels, and it is commonly viewed as configuring sustainable paths towards the fulfilling of a basic human need, alternative to the arguably unsustainable, still predominant, global food chains.

Until recently, food issues have been ignored in regional and urban planning, both in politics and academia. As pointed out by Pothukuchi and Kaufman (2000), the food system is “notable by its absence from the writing of planning scholars, from the plans prepared by planning practitioners, and from the classrooms in which planning students are taught.” However, in this last decade and a half, a new awareness is globally rising, partially due to the food and financial crises. It’s becoming part of public awareness that a healthy community needs healthy and fresh available food for all.

Issues like food insecurity, food sovereignty, the survival and sustainability of rural areas and of European agriculture, economically and culturally, are put together in the same sentences and frameworks of analysis. Also, food issues are gaining space in political proposals and laws, pressing for a further and deeper understanding of their possible implications on the development of healthy and inclusive territories.

However, in the Portuguese context, LFS's are still an undeveloped concept that urges for further research. To understand and influence a local food system, it will be necessary to consider the components and conditions of said system and that they are exclusive to each place or region. What is more, we must take into account the relations between the different components, being that the quality of such relations is also consequential to the place where the vehicles and processes will occur. Through the development of local agro-food systems, production and purchase are brought together, embedding social, cultural and political principles that aim to merge rural and urban values, meanings and actors.

Furthermore, the concepts that emerged in the last decade concerning food and territory were numerous and not without controversy, especially when they go around the idea of sustainability, and how sustainable "local" can be. Such controversy gave this field a strong impulse into maturing its research methods and concept definitions that were at risk of losing their objectivity. Such lack of clarity was a consequence of what was described by Sonnino (2013) as an "early period of enthusiasm" for the potential of local food networks in the sustainable development of regions.

Born and Purcell (2006), in a powerful critique, appeal to planners' strong caution as they engage more with food systems, to avoid what they called "the local trap". It became clear that it was also crucial to analyze the fragilities of initiatives and even the fragility and ambiguity of theoretical concepts associated to local foodscapes.

The more recent articles and publications on local food systems are taking huge steps into clarifying many of these obstacles and bringing more consistent approaches to the definitions of concepts and the search for more robust methodologies of analysis and intervention. Also, the last decade provided many examples of initiatives around the globe, with different leaderships, from the community to the political level. An increasing number of studies are confirming a new research agenda, concerning a shift of leadership from a beginner's niche and community period, to cities taking the lead in the response to food issues and food insecurity crises (Sonnino, 2013).

The further we go in the study of LFS from a Portuguese regional and local context, the more we realize the need to improve the empirical knowledge and data analysis around this issue, starting by learning about the perceptions and practices of consumers and producers.

The aim is to be able to take a first scoop through this "Baixo Vouga" region's productive potential. As Eriksen (2013) points out: "local food tend to be perceived by each actor based

on their unique priorities, anxieties, capacities, goals and values”. We had no idea what was going on in people’s minds or pockets; what were their perceptions, routines and concerns?

A first step was conducting an inquiry to consumers about their habits and concerns on the provenance of food items: Where are most purchases made? Who sells it? What are the main concerns about food from a consumer’s point of view? How do consumers see the production of food? Are people producing food? Where?

The following step would be to listen to the food producers in “Baixo Vouga”: Who are they? What is produced, where and how?

These are just some of the first question that needed to be asked, and hopefully this empirical scoop of Baixo Vouga region will constitute an interesting beginning to the production of analysis and information about local food possibilities for Portuguese regions.

Mainly, we are driven by the idea that to understand local food, we need to take into account both the multifunctional dimensions of food and the systemic nature of LFS, and to do so both in a theoretical approach and in our empirical analysis.

We share the information that we gather so far, and the results we were able to produce. Already we realized the need for consistent data information that could enrich this study.

As we go further, we realize how pressing it is to go deeper, even more when laws are already being produced and approved, like the very recent D.L. 85/2015 de 21 de Maio, that establishes the legal framework for Local Producer’s Markets. We fear that in this speeding of processes, definitions and concepts could be taken for granted, without the necessary parallel study and discussion that an issue with this level of impact on people’s lives should produce.

Accordingly, it is also crucial to press forward into involving academic knowledge in the political discussion at all levels, if there is any chance to take advantage of the multifunctional potential of local food systems in the development of regions, both rural and urban areas, and the ones in between...

LFS present challenges to the governmental institutions and to civil society, universities and municipal governments, in the development of new policies and processes that include food issues, and in bringing together a range of fields and traditionally dissociated stakeholders.

This study constitutes a first effort in addressing both conceptual development of this field of planning studies in the Portuguese context, and empirical work aiming at gathering the information needed to understand the opportunities and constraints of a LFS in Baixo Vouga.

We hope to contribute to the interdisciplinary discussion necessary for the growth of this field of studies, and to a critical analysis of certain concepts, like “local”, “proximity”, “sustainable”, that live in the borders between rurality and urbanity.

## **References**

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