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Editor

Dr. Ernest SHTEPANI

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12. INTERNATIONAL EUROPEAN CONGRESS ON ADVANCED STUDIES IN BASIC SCIENCES

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ANALYSIS OF GOVERNANCE MODELS FOR SUSTAINABLE AND HEALTHY FOOD SYSTEMS

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable food systems are systems that safeguard economic, social and environmental sustainability by fomenting social progress, promoting efficient management of natural resources, providing nutritious food and ensuring fair compensation for all actors in the food chain. In recent years, several initiatives worldwide have been created to ensure and promote the sustainability of the current food systems. These initiatives aim to enable people to have access to quality, nutritious and sustainable foods, combat social and economic inequalities and promote synergies between consumers and producers. To promote these initiatives is crucial in order to contribute to improved food consumption and production patterns towards more nutritive and sustainable foods.

The objective of this research was to identify and characterize sustainable food initiatives in order to understand their structure, model of governance, motivations, typology of actors involved and future prospects.

This investigation was based on an interview guide that was applied to the managers or those responsible for the sustainable initiatives related with the food system. Seven initiatives were included, and the semi-structured interviews were carried out online during the summer of 2024. The recorded interviews were transcribed, and the content analysed.

The results obtained by the interviews showed that the principal motivators are related to food and sustainability, in all three, economic, environmental and social, dimensions. It was further identified that the most important cause of success was the availability and commitment of the people involved in the initiative. The seven initiatives analysed were implemented to meet local needs, both of producers and consumers, while promoting sustainability. Furthermore, they aimed at encouraging economic circularity, transference and sharing of knowledge, valorisation of local and rural resources, and



management of food waste. These aspects contribute to more efficient and eco-friendly local food supply chains, providing the consumers with fresher and healthier food products.

The existence of local or nationwide initiatives related with the sustainability of food system contribute to a more efficient use of natural resources in order to obtain healthy, sustainable and fair food products, that the modern consumers tend to value in search for a more friendly co-existence between the necessity to produce food and the recognized need to preserve the natural ecosystems.

Keywords: sustainability; food system; initiatives; governance; characterization

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable food systems are ways of producing, distributing, consuming and disposing of food that respect the environment, promote human health and ensure social and economic justice throughout the food chain — from farm to fork. The concept interacts multiple dimensions as shown in Figure 1. These encompass a dimension related to environmental responsibility, one other related to proper nutrition, a third related to fair trade and social responsibility, and a final dimension related to economic viability.



Figure 1. Main points that characterize a sustainable food system.

Agroecological science brings fundamental elements to rethink the production-consumption relationship, since this connection is intertwined in society and, therefore, in nature. Agroecology allows for a questioning of the current neoliberal food order, since, as a science-practice-movement, it brings concepts and worldviews located in time and space, cultural heritages, local and territorial knowledge and expertise, in addition to the movements that dynamize territories, precisely because of its capacity to break with paradigms that are destructive to society and nature. In essence, the construction of knowledge that values the health and well-being of society and nature is essential (Giraldo & Rosset, 2016).

Healthy food systems represent an integrated model of food production, distribution and consumption that prioritizes human health, food and nutritional security, without compromising environmental and socioeconomic sustainability. The global concept of "healthy food systems" can be understood from a perspective that integrates knowledge about food systems, healthy eating and sustainability.



According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) a sustainable food system is a “system that delivers food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social, and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for future generations are not compromised” (Florença et al., 2025).

Several agricultural and food production practices have been extensively encouraged to enhance agricultural sustainability. These include: •Agroecology, •Organic farming •Regenerative agriculture, •Conservation agriculture, and •Sustainable intensification. Typically, sustainable agricultural practices are associated with small farms and non-corporate food producers, including cattle producing facilities, that can't usually compete with the resources of the major bodies in the agri-food markets. This difficulty in accessing resources is evident at the production level, as well as at the retail level, since it influences the efficiency of the agri-food distribution. This stage clearly benefits the large-size farms in detriment of the smaller ones (Olagunju et al., 2025).

Sustainable and healthy food systems should be capable of promoting appropriate eating habits, aimed at improving human health, social wellbeing, fair trade and valorisation of the rural populations. For these to be effective they require the reconstruction and deepening of knowledge. Appropriate recommendations for enhancing eating habits in a practical and everyday way are necessary, but these also intertwine with other dimensions of the production-consumption relationship (Paula et al., 2022).

Reflecting on sustainable and healthy food systems implies problematizing distinct and complex variables that, to some extent, influence the dimensions of producing, harvesting, processing, distributing, feeding oneself among others. Furthermore, to debate this topic, it is imperative to expand the notion of food system beyond the material and economic senses, whose industrial dynamics are sustained by destructive practices that expel people from their territories, expropriate nature, contaminate soil, water, air and food, and sicken and kill people and the environment (Friedmann, 2005).

The objective of this work was to characterize some local food initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable food systems, based on local trade, social valorisation and creation of economic value for farmers and food providers and sellers.

METHODOLOGY

This was a pilot study conducted with a semi-structured interview made to six initiatives identified in Portugal and one in Germany. The research was carried out between June and August 2024. The interviews were conducted online according to the availability of the people responsible for each of the initiatives included in the study. The interviews were digitally recorded after obtaining the informed consent, written or verbal, of the participants, with a varied duration between 13 min and 80 min. After every interview, the records were coded to maintain anonymity. The interviews were later on translated into writing by the researchers, manually, without using any software for the process. The data were then curated in the form of Word documents and Excel files.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The seven initiatives included a wide variety of members, with each of them having many of the typified actors, like it can be seen in Figure 2. While initiatives #2 and #3 included a wide range of typologies, initiatives #2 and #6 were more limited in their action and roles.

The origin of the initiatives was also various, with some having been created to meet a specific goal or fulfil a specific need, while others were setup by movements of people devoted to the promotion of local food production. According to Puerta-Zapata et al. (2023) food distribution is narrowly associated with



territorial socioeconomic changes. The impact on local communities of “buying local” is felt at many levels, not only economic but also in a way that helps fixating more population into rural areas, otherwise condemned to abandon.

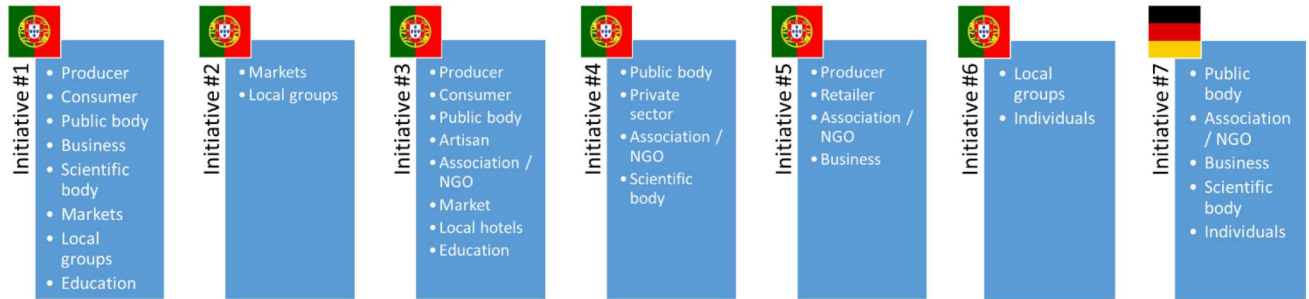


Figure 2. Typologies of actors in the initiatives included in the study.

Regarding the main goals of the seven initiatives, all give a special focus on sustainability. This means that food initiatives are driven by a strong motivation to contribute to more sustainable food systems. Sustainability along the food supply chains, is not only driven by maximizing efficiency while minimizing environmental negative impacts, but also refers to application of principles like circularity, fair trade, social responsibility, among other objectives (Nguyen et al., 2025; Zarbà et al., 2025). Another priority goal of five of the initiatives was the valorisation of local products and rural communities. The valorisation has a pivotal role in shaping the business strategies for local food products, while having a transformative potential to improve the whole local food production/selling relation (Misleh, 2025). The distribution and utilization of products from small, local, and family farming productions, is the third most frequent objective of the initiatives (four out of seven), tied with the desire to share knowledge and experience, improve circularity and economy, and having a social dimension. Other goals were not so expressive, like for example food quality (only in the case of three of the seven initiatives) or food equity (only in one case). Interestingly the objective of targeting organic food systems was also stated by one of the initiatives, probably because it looks at the sustainability of the food production from a wider perspective.



Figure 3. Goals of the initiatives included in the study.

Regarding the structural and organizational model of the initiatives, four had legal structure while three did not, and five were part of a wider national network, with only two not being integrated in a national



consortium. Furthermore, two of the initiatives actively promoted activities within their territory. Most of the initiatives (five) had a horizontal hierarchy with shared leadership.

When the representatives of the initiatives included in this work were asked about that they believed contributed for the success of the initiative, a wide variety of responses were obtained, as illustrated in Figure 4. The availability, will, commitment, and sensibility of the people involved in the initiatives was the reason most cited for the successful action and reach of the sustainable food initiatives. The active communication, the ability to connect with locals and establish confidence links constitutes a valuable asset for the success of the initiative and for the acceptance of its actions and involvement. For the initiatives to be created and stay active in the long term, it is necessary to involve numerous actors, organizations, and communities, establishing multilevel connections and multisectoral partnerships. Resilience is a fundamental characteristic for food initiative to stay in action long after its establishment, continuously contributing to a beneficial promotion of local food products, to the valorization of family farmers and small farmers, while contributing to the preservation of the environment (Brassesco et al., 2022; Janin et al., 2023; Zurek et al., 2022).

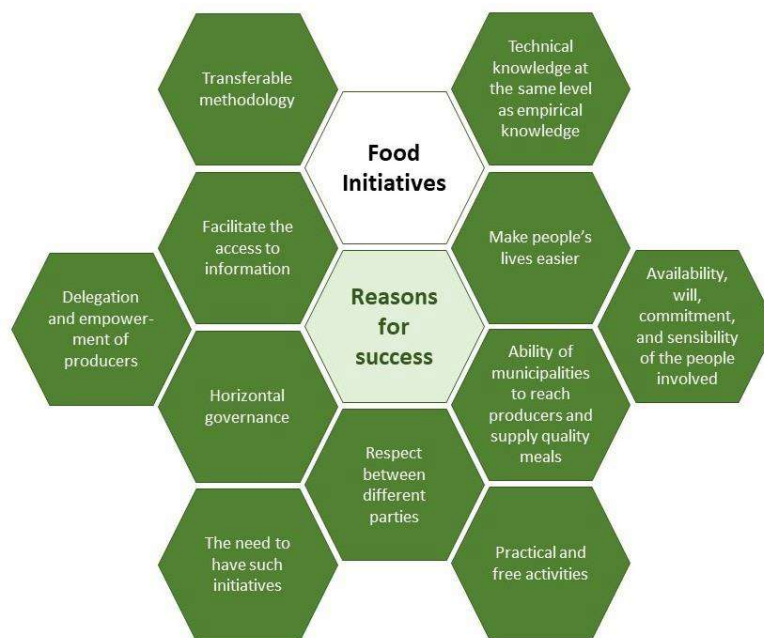


Figure 4. Reasons pointed out for the success of the initiatives.

CONCLUSIONS

This work showed that, among the food initiatives included in this study, some aspects can be highlighted, such as:

- Sustainable food initiatives focus on proper nutrition as well as sustainability;
- The sustainability of the initiatives highlight different perspectives (economic, social, environmental);
- Most of the initiatives stimulated economic circularity;
- Most of the initiatives promoted fair trade;
- Many of the initiatives centered their action to the valorisation of farmers, rural territories, and local businesses;



- Several initiatives stimulated increased employment opportunities;
- Food literacy and knowledge sharing are also on the sight of these initiatives, as a way to assist in meeting local needs;
- These initiatives also promote environmental sustainability, by encouraging more sustainable ways to produce foods (like organic farming), while also promoting biodiversity preservation, reducing food waste, and consuming local foods, thus reducing the carbon footprint.

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