

Exploring the challenges and drivers of applying food systems approach: How municipalities can address this concept in practice.

Introduction

The food challenges we face nowadays are a complex consequence of how the food system operates. The current global food system has been revealing several paradoxes. A food system approach can acknowledge the complexity of these inconsistencies by recognising the entangled sphere of activities, interactions, and actors from farm to fork, which are influenced and integrated into major dimensions such as environmental, health, economic, political and social (Parsons, Hawkes and Wells, 2019). Systems and comprehensive approaches are essential to build coherent policies (SOFI,2021).

Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore what challenges and opportunities Portuguese cities face in operationalising and implementing the concept of food systems approach (FSA). A literature review of the FSA concept and assets in the context of urban food policy was conducted to develop an evaluation framework. The FSA Framework constructed was then used to assess food systems' strategies of five Portuguese municipalities. Information on food systems strategies and city governance models was gathered through semi-structured qualitative interviews with each city food strategy representatives. Besides strategies information, participants insights about FSA definition and the challenges and drivers identified to implement it were also explored.

Findings

The FSA framework analysed these cities building on its performance related to 'food systems data monitoring', 'multistakeholder collaboration', 'multiple outcomes' tools, 'horizontal integration' and 'vertical integration' governance. Cities achieved different levels of FSA with two of them standing out for implementing integrated food strategies. Public food procurement and multistakeholder collaboration structures were shown to be mechanisms that positively promote an FSA. Food system data monitoring and horizontal integration were the lowest ranked criteria confirmed as challenges by the interviewees. Overall, cities mentioned that the lack of funding, collaborative governance skills, interdepartmental food action, and food systems data access were the major gaps preventing them from applying FSA. Therefore, recommendations to enable multi-level and multi-actor governance structures are made to address the main constraints identified.

Conclusions

Although it is too soon to assess the success and impact of these integrated strategies, this study has brought essential insights on which mechanisms and tools are important to enable and promote FSA. With proper multi-level governance mechanisms, local authorities can catalyse their innovative contribution and integrate their solutions into solving local, national and global food systems' problems.