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Feeding Sustainable Cities Platform reshaping the Portuguese foodscape: Exploring the role of internet and ICTs

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Abstract

The Portuguese national platform - Feeding Sustainable Cities started in June 2018 as a civil society initiative aiming at reshaping the Portuguese food systems. It started with roughly 40 members and only one year later 260 people were engaged, demonstrating a steady increase. This paper explores the following research questions: (1) To what extent internet and more broadly speaking ICTS can be a positive tool to improve food democracy in countries with limited civic engagement? (2) Are permanent engagement, co-learning and trust among food actors, the basic values substantiating a capacity to move from knowledge exchange to a more engaging advocacy capacity at political level? The results of the preliminary research suggest that food actors are willing to be better informed. However, they feel the need to broaden the debate through democratic horizontal exchange able to bypass power asymmetries which is proved to be facilitate by internet. In conclusion, in spite of the significant role played by this platform on building trust based on co-learning among national food actors, it seems to be still too soon to conclude that it can move from a multi-stakeholder to co-governance food movement.

Background of recent food and agriculture movements in South European Countries – a closer look on Portugal and Spain

The report "Portuguese Nonprofit Sector in Comparative Perspective" (2008) gives an overview of civil society's organization's workforce as a percentage of the active economic population based on data from 38 countries[2], including Portugal and Spain. The leading countries are Netherlands (14,4%), Canada (11,1%), Belgium (10,9%), Ireland (10,4%), United States (9,8%) and United Kingdom (9,5%). France (7,6%), Norway (7,2%), Sweden (7,1%) and Germany (5.9%). Interestingly enough those countries are steering Agriculture and Food movements among the most advanced "food democracies", as Canada, United Sates or the United Kingdom illustrate. On the other hand, Southern European countries such as Portugal (4,0%), Spain (4,3%) and Italy (3,8%) rank well below average (7,4%). This might contribute to explain why such countries had weaker food related movements and only in recent years started to follow similar food paths, at great speed, tending to catch up the ones with a higher density of civil society organizations.

Notably, Portugal and Spain are somehow facing quite a similar expansion. Roughly speaking two platforms were created since 2016 in Spain, and one in Portugal– Feeding Sustainable Cities[3] being launched in 2018. The "Right for Food Spanish Observatory"[4] was created at the end of 2016 and has been active ever since.

The "Agroecology cities network"[5] was founded in early 2017. Unlike Portugal national platform that explicitly aim to gather all actors and sectors related to the food system, Spain food networks are specific food actors based: cities on the one hand and academia on the other. Briefly, both countries share the same civil society weakness backgrounds and the same challenge: how to feed national food movements in countries without food democracy tradition.

Portuguese platform Feeding Sustainable Cities started from an external trigger, but as being strongly growing since

The Portuguese national Platform Feeding Sustainable Cities is a civic society movement that started on the 26 of June 2018 with 40 members. Today it comprises about 260 members due to a snowball process of member's affiliation and a growing interest in the food issue. RUAF Foundation working session with Portuguese Municipalities on April 2018, was the external triggers that facilitated the launching of the Food Platform. Basically, it led to a public commitment of keeping the debate on food and agriculture more permanently open and fueled by different voices. The challenge was taken by three women with complementary skills and knowledge on the various aspects of what food entitles as well as interpersonal relations and communication skills.

Data from November 2018[6] based on 94 members at that time, shows that a majority of members are from central and local governments (39), third sector and civil society represent (27), academy (20), public sector (4), international organizations / FAO (2) and (2) were institution representatives. In November 2018 an online survey was launched in order to define members priorities. The survey, answered by 35 members (from the 94 members at that time), is showing that members priorities are: 1 - National best-practices sharing; 2 - Dissemination of national events; 3 - International best-practices sharing; 4 - Extension of the network to other food chain actors; 5 – In-person meetings and visits of initiatives. In short, members are mainly seeking to better know what other food actors are doing, to better know as well each other and to build a common understanding on food and agriculture issues.

State of the art on ICT contribution

Literature review is very clear on the contribution of "horizontal learning" a central concept within popular education, which involves 'democratic communication on the same level (… and the intention to move towards) non-hierarchical and antiauthoritarian creation rather than reaction' (Sitrin 2006). Additionally, research has shown evidence of the beneficial effects of Internet use on engagement (Kim et al. 2004). Studies on internet impact on political engagement, are showing that Internet's interactivity, diversity, flexibility, speed, convenience, low cost, and information capacity potentially allow the public to become more knowledgeable about politics and government—a first step toward greater participation (Norris 2001). Online communication has also been found to be more heterogeneous with regard to physical factors such as race, gender, and age (Rheingold 2000). Nevertheless, other studies are showing that those who were civically engaged before the Internet were more likely to adopt the new technology (Jennings and Zeitner, 2003), which can be a challenge for a balanced participation of all the food actors and sectors and considering their quite different mastering of ICTs.

Those observations led us to ours research questions: (1) To what extent internet and more broadly speaking ICTS can be a positive tool to improve food democracy in countries with limited civic engagement? (2)

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[5] Link - http://www.ciudadesagroecologicas.eu/antecedentes-y-futuro/ (Accessed May 2019)
[6] We are working on the update of data members profile. Expected to be available late 2019.

Are permanent engagement, co-learning and trust among food actors, the basic values substantiating a capacity to move from knowledge exchange to a more engaging advocacy capacity at political level?

Analysis of email exchange flow: preliminary lessons

Beyond its swift expansion of the national platform membership is important to understand if and why (1) more members mean more knowledge sharing and; (2) who are the most digital active members. Results are showing that (see table 1) in spite of members affiliation increase the curve of emails shared is quite flat, meaning that more member doesn't involve more information shared by all. Although could mean that different members are participating in the sharing of information. This needs further research.
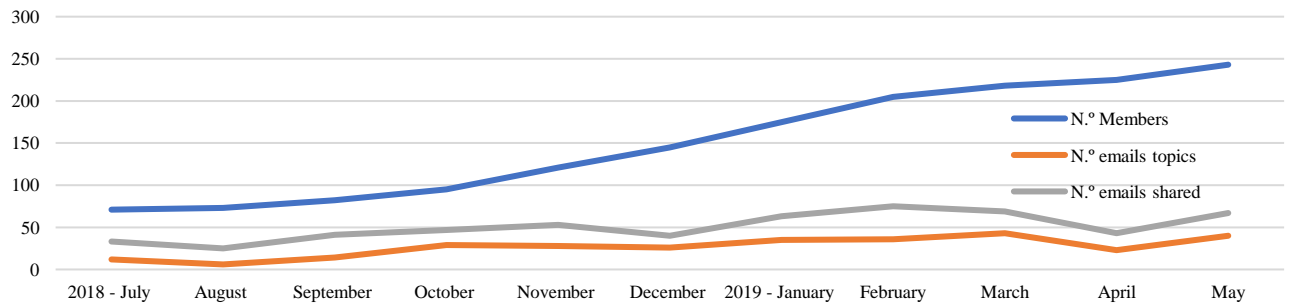

Table 1 – Platform Feeding Sustainable Cities – N. º of Members vs. emails and topics shared from July 2018 to May 2019. Source: Author elaboration 2019

What do we know about members' profiles? According to available data, half of the 10 most active members, five are scholars, two belong to central and local government organizations, two from the third sector and the last being the network facilitator. In total, scholars sent 155 emails, central and local governments 54, and the third sector 29 (see table 2).
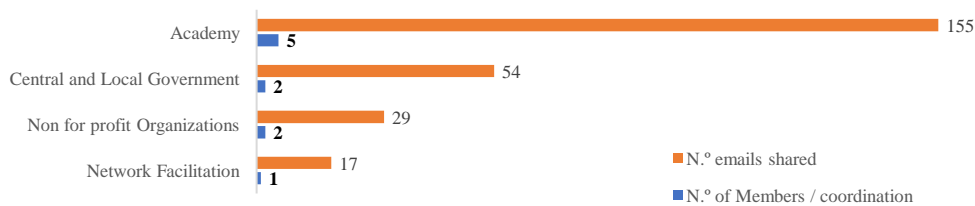

Table 2 – Platform Feeding Sustainable Cities – Who are the most active members since ever. Source: Author elaboration 2019

Discussion and further Research

The already significant membership illustrates fairly well that ICTs and primarily internet were a facilitating tool to connect different actors and sectors. This result is in line with previous research that confirm internet ability to provide individuals with information that fosters discussion and civic engagement (Lassen 2005). The number of affiliates indicates a common and growing interest on food and agriculture. The results of the research suggest as well that food actors are looking for knowledge-sharing and skill-building. On the other hand, results are showing that scholars have been so far leading the knowledge-sharing and skill-building process

i.e. academy is the agent that is building the "shared motivation" through repeated quality integrations that foster trust, mutual understanding, internal legitimacy and collective commitment as referred by (Emerson et al, 2011). In fact, breaking the invisible glass wall of limited "other food members actors' participation" and get higher exposure, is a continuous challenge for the coordinating group that needs good will, patience and determination. This is being done with direct email, phone calls, or face-to-face meetings, to increase confidence and to get members to be more actively involved. To smoothen power asymmetries and balance participation of diverse actors and sectors of the food system is a challenge for the future. Further research is needed on how to empower actors to participate, primarily the ones with less discursive power, and less technology skills.

In summary, the preliminary results of the on-going and limited research on the recently created platform focusing on the role of internet and ICTs tend to suggest that in Portugal, internet plays an important role on building trust through "horizontal learning" among food actors, by 'democratic communication on the same level and antiauthoritarian creation (Sitrin 2006). However, results suggest that those who were more technology skilled and civically engaged before the platform was launched were primarily scholars that by and large led the process, benefitting it and benefitted by its development [win-win relation]. Finally, it seems to be still too soon to conclude that the national Portuguese food platform might move along the governance continuum from a multi-stakeholder's initiative to food advocacy and policy engagement in a co-governance perspective. At this time, such a shift remains something foreseen by some of the platform core members, but not yet in the overall member's priority agenda. Time will show if this digital platform will be able to intensify connections with more local, national and international organizations, in order to increase its advocacy capacity at policy level.

Acknowledgements

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