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"We want to be part of the broader project": family farmers and local food governance in Porto Alegre, Brazil

ABSTRACT

Brazil has been widely lauded for the development of its agricultural sector, its policies against hunger, and its support of family farming. Yet, the future of small-scale family farmers remains uncertain. In this paper, we question whether food system localization facilitates the integration of small-scale family farmers into food governance processes in Porto Alegre, Brazil. To answer this, we present the City Region Food System (CRFS) as a conceptual approach to explore the relationship between food systems localization and enhanced participation of small-scale family farmers into food governance. After introducing the case study of local food in Porto Alegre, we shed light on key structural inequalities (e.g. location and capacity to organize) that limit family farmers' participation in local food practices, as well as influence their involvement in food governance. We then examine linkages between local food policy efforts and family farmers' praxis, attempting to discern mismatches and related implications for the development of an inclusive CRFS. We argue that systematization of local food practices (e.g. regulation and standardization of products) within the city region represents a double-edged sword as it might translate into a decrease in farmers' autonomy and ownership of local initiatives but could also burden them with regulations not fit for purpose. In conclusion, we advance that a CRFS approach to planning can help to address structural inequalities and power asymmetries in local food governance only if informed by local dynamics and based on context sensitive mechanisms for participatory governance incorporating a variety of small-scale family farmers (and other stakeholders).

KEY WORDS:

Family farming, City Region Food System, Porto Alegre, Local food governance, Inclusion

1. Introduction

Brazil has been widely lauded for the development of its agricultural sector, its policies against hunger, and its support of family farming. Yet, the future of small-scale family farmers remains uncertain. Bringing political attention to their situation and including them in formal policy processes at national and local levels continue to be challenging. At the national level, Brazil presents world famous model of participation in policy-making such as the National Council for Food and Nutrition Security (CONSEA, 2009). However,

approaches and programs around rural development, agriculture, and food have not always been consistent and coordinated as different interests pull in disparate, often contradictory directions (Schneider *et al.*, 2010). This is particularly the case nowadays in front of considerable political change in Brazil, wherein the agribusiness sector is being prioritized by the new governmental agenda (Nascimento, 2016). At the local level, despite the establishment of a multitude of participatory arenas, the effective inclusion of the population in the governance of their territory is not always a reality (Cornwall & Shankland, 2013). In this paper, we define governance as the management functions of societies – formal and informal – that are generally focused or coordinated around the State or government institutions but involve diverse actors, including civil society and the private sector (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 136). By extension, food governance encompasses the diversity of management functions of food at a societal level.

Going back to the 1940s, small-scale family farmers received little to no attention from policy makers and had little role in policy processes (Falcão, 2006; Grisa & Schneider, 2015). At that time, rural depopulation and the progressive industrialization of agriculture fostered an increase of land concentration and the development of export-oriented cash crop production in Brazil (Falcão, 2006). During the dictatorship (1964-1985), the State further supported this so-called *modernização conservadora* (conservative modernization).

However, by the end of the 1970s, social movements grew stronger and new rural syndicates emerged. Small-scale family farmers and rural workers mobilized, demanding better working conditions, land reforms, as well as targeted support systems. Over the next 30 years, these groups became more formally organized and got involved in institutionalized political processes, including participating in the definition and implementation of new rural development policies (Grisa & Schneider, 2015). The creation of the National Program for the Strengthening of Family Farming (PRONAF) in 1995 and the restructuring of the Ministry of Agricultural Development (MDA) in the early 2000s supported the formal political recognition of the role of small-scale family farming in Brazil by acknowledging their production capacities and exploring strategies to better integrate them into formal food systems (Chmielewska & Souza, 2010).

As part of these changes, food system localization was advanced as a mechanism to enhance the autonomy and livelihoods of small-scale family farmers as well as creating more inclusive food systems (Scarabelot & Schneider, 2012; Niederle 2014). In this perspective, the State increasingly embraced civil society-driven local food initiatives and developed targeted public procurement strategies such as the Food Procurement Programme (PAA) and the National School Feeding Programme (PNAE). These were accompanied by the development of participatory governance mechanisms which, based on the context and mode of engagement between the State and civil society, had varied effects on inclusion of local stakeholders (e.g.: Baiocchi et al., 2008; Cornwall & Shankland, 2013).

Given this recent history, and the rapid political change currently underway, we ask how, if at all, food system localization efforts facilitate the integration of small-scale family farmers into food governance processes (governance of food marketing and food regulation, more precisely) in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

In what follows we present the CRFS approach, the research methods and then introduce the case of local food in Porto Alegre. Next, we elaborate on two bottlenecks identified through the study that limit the incorporation of small-scale family farmers' various interests and

perspectives into local food governance: (1) geographical, political and socio-economic barriers to farmers' access to local food markets; (2) (side)-effects of regulation and standardization of local food practices on farmers' autonomy and inclusion. We conclude by proposing key elements to be considered in CRFS planning for more inclusive local food governance.

2. Framing the research: the CRFS approach

ACity Region Food System (CRFS) approach allows to include in the analysis agents and institutions from the metropolitan area of Porto Alegre and beyond, and explore the relationship between food system localization and enhanced participation of small-scale family farmers. The approach is appropriate given that CRFSs, by other names, have been an important component of the Brazilian alternative rural development paradigm (e.g.: Duarte & Thomé, 2016; Belik & Cunha, 2015).

The CRFS is relatively new to emerge as a concept and approach. It has been defined as:

> The complex network of actors, processes and relationships to do with food production, processing, marketing, and consumption that exist in a given geographical region that includes a more or less concentrated urban center and its surroundings peri-urban and rural hinterland; a regional landscape across which flows of people, goods and ecosystem services are managed (in Foster *et al.*, 2015, p.9).

Generally, a CRFS approach allows us to take a more holistic perspective over local food initiatives by calling to explore geographical, social and political dynamics in the city region (IPES FOOD, 2015; Wiskerke, 2015). It can be used as a frame for action to work towards better rural-urban connections as a result of strengthened, coordinated and systematized short food supply chains (Forster *et al.*, 2015). This approach can also support the development of inclusive and resilient governance arrangements by enhancing dialogue between various local stakeholders (Wiskerke, 2015; Crivitz *et al.,* 2016).

If we regard localization as "something done by people" (Hines, 2000), CRFS strategies for good governance should include appropriate mechanisms to involve all stakeholders in the definition of its principles. As stressed by Crivitz *et al.* (2016, p.17), drawing on Pretty (1998), "Organizing from the grassroots is key here - to start from the multiple, local, historically and culturally specific contexts in which people are trying to improve their social and environmental conditions". In this perspective, the CRFS can help us to address critiques of food system localization and the tendency to frame the local as a space that is inherently good, or wherein processes are linear and conflict-free (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; Born & Purcell, 2006; DeLind, 2011; Tregear, 2011). Shedding light on the complexity of the local context becomes central for developing place-based food policies that contribute to dislodge social injustice in the city region.

That is not to say that there are not limitations that need to be considered when referring to the CRFS approach (Blay-Palmer *et al*., 2015). The most relevant challenges to our analysis are linked to setting the scale and boundaries of the CRFS. This represents a difficult task both in research and planning processes as bounding food system can privilege or disadvantage different people (Hinrichs, 2010). Thus, it is important to be attentive and transparent about how such restricting decisions are made, as well as to the stakeholders that are involved (and those that are excluded).

3. Research Methods and Sources of Data

In what follows we present the results of a study on incorporation of small-scale family farmers' various interests and perspectives into governance of food regulation and marketing in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The data is derived from ethnographic research on local food practices in the metropolitan area of Porto Alegre conducted between March and June 2016. Data was collected by means of document analysis, participant observation, semi-structured interviews and group reflection times. The researcher worked voluntary in farmers' markets, participated to on-farm activities, farmers' reunions, protests and meetings with the municipal government. Nineteen semi-structured interviews were conducted, mainly with family farmers but also with the employees of municipal departments and local extension services. The interviews were key to gather information on local food marketing initiatives, impacts of food regulation and gain insight into farmers' organization and participation in decision making processes. The data was coded (bottom-up coding) and analysed (content analysis) using Atlas.ti.

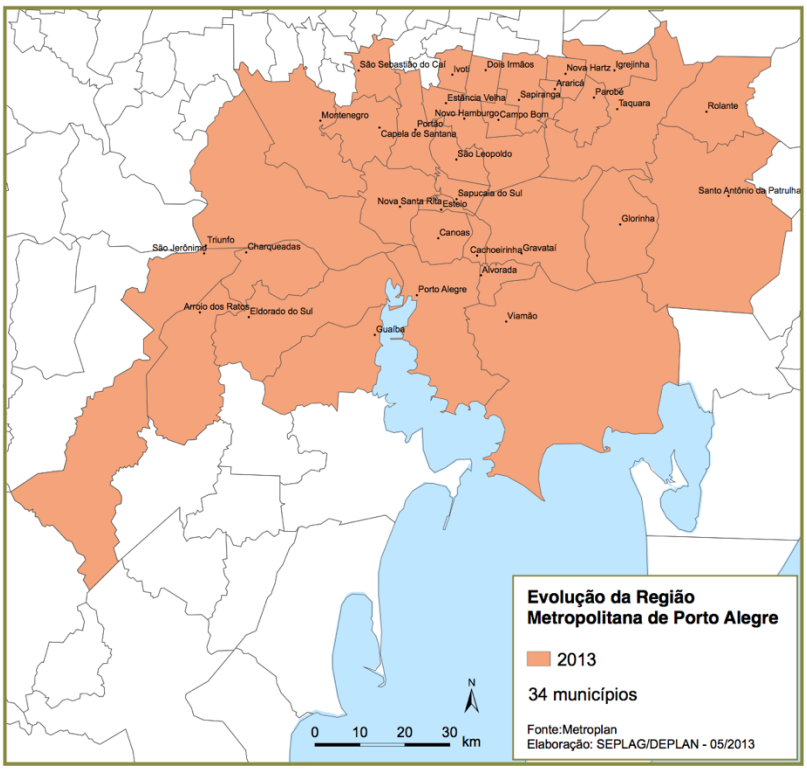
We focused explicitly on small-scale family farmers as defined in Brazil in the laws 11.326/2006 and 12.512/2011 (Schneider & Cassol, 2013). The law 11.326/2006 defines family farming based on four criteria: a maximum land tenure defined regionally; a predominant non-wage family labour; an income predominantly originating from the farming activity; and a farm operated by the family. In the municipality of Porto Alegre maximum land tenure corresponds to 20 hectares. All small-scale family farmers engaging in local food practices (mostly direct selling) in the metropolitan area of Porto Alegre were eligible to participate so long as the major part of their products was sold within this area. Most of the farmers interviewed were based in the metropolitan area of Porto Alegre and only few came from other nearby regions. Most farmers were agro-ecological producers. This is due in part to the relatively strong presence of agro-ecological movements in the metropolitan area of Porto Alegre and their engagement in direct selling activities.

4. Questioning small-scale family farmers' inclusion in local food markets and governance in Porto Alegre

4.1. Introducing the case: applying the CRFS approach in Porto Alegre, Brazil

Porto Alegre is a municipality and the capital of the state Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. It covers an area of 496,682 square kilometres and has an estimated population of 1,481,019 inhabitants, which makes it the tenth most populous city of the country (IBGE, 2016). Porto Alegre is also a metropolitan area (the 5th most populous metropolitan area of Brazil) commonly referred as the Greater Porto Alegre, which includes 33 municipalities that surround the city. The Greater Porto Alegre is characterized by a combination of urban, peri-urban and rural areas. The latter are marked by the coexistence of agricultural activities, conservation areas, small businesses, industries and, as urban areas expands, both regular and irregular housing. Particularly since the 1990s, the expansion of urban areas translated into the extinction of many spaces intended for agriculture (Kozenieski, 2010).

The metropolitan area of Porto Alegre. Source: State Secretariat of Planning, Governance and Management, Rio Grande do Sul, 2013



Local food marketing strategies of small-scale family farmers of the metropolitan area are diverse. Among the farmers we encountered, many engaged in direct selling at farmers' markets (e.g.: the *feiras modelo* - standard farmers' markets - and the *feiras agro-ecologicas* - agro-ecological farmers' markets -), roadside sales, direct deliveries and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes. Most of these initiatives were put in place by the producers themselves to diversify their production and distribution strategies. This often entailed a decision to localise by exiting the conventional supply chain model pivoting around state supply centres (CEASA/RS). Some local food initiatives are directly planned and controlled by the farmers (and are often in contrast with government regulations), while others are supported and monitored by the municipal government.

The research uncovered several positive cases of municipal government – civil society partnerships for inclusion of vulnerable family farmers in local food practices and their governance. A first example is the initiative of the municipal department of urban cleaning, which, since the early 1990s, started a dialogue with urban small-scale pig farmers to help them meet legal standards for production and commercialize their produces. The outcome was a plan called *Reaproveitamento de Resíduos Sólidos Orgânicos via Suinocultura* or Reutilization of Urban Organic Residuals through Pig Farming, aimed at developing a system to collect, process and donate organic waste of various establishment to small-scale pig farmers. Over time, the department also supported the development of an urban small-scale pig farmers' organization, which regularly participated to local public procurement programs. This case showed that continuous dialogue between local government and farmers can translate into a more holistic project serving several purposes at the time such as making urban waste becomes functional, supporting the organization of small-scale producers as well as facilitating their access to markets.

A second example is the Producers' Association of the Agro-ecological Metropolitan Network (RAMA), which gathers more than 80 families of agro-ecological farmers of the metropolitan area of Port Alegre (Cruz et al., 2016). The association was established with the support of municipal extension services with the goal of facilitating the commercialization of organic products in the metropolitan area. In 2011, these producers agreed to form a *Sistema Participativo de Garantia* (participatory certification scheme) and created RAMA as a managing and guarantor entity. Thanks to this scheme, many family farmers can now directly lead the organic certification process and participate to local organic farmers' markets. The association also provided small scale family farmers with the possibility to exchange knowledge and develop joint projects (e.g., seeds exchanges, collaboration for direct deliveries to local restaurants).

More generally, the municipal departments dealing directly or indirectly with local food planning, marketing and regulation in the city are several. For example, the Municipal Secretariat of Production, Industry and Trade is responsible for planning the development of farmers' markets and implementing the Food Procurement Programme, the Municipal Secretariat for Education is responsible for school food procurement (and the implementation of the National School Feeding Programme), and the Municipal Secretariat for Urbanism is in charge of land use planning. Synergies between the various interventions are lacking and regulations are often in contrast.

Overall, Porto Alegre presents a set of heterogeneous local food practices, often in a continuous process of transformation. These practices are shaped by local regulations as well as farmers' different experiences, capacities and ideologies. However, as exemplified below, the profiles of small-scale family farmers engaging in local food practices remain relatively homogeneous as it requires access to specific opportunities and abilities. In the next sections, we elaborate on these challenges and discuss two bottlenecks to the advancement of a CRFS that includes and incorporates small-scale family farmers' interests and perspectives.

4.2. Family farmers' involvement in local food markets: challenges to integration in Porto Alegre

The line of argument of many food activists often presents local food practices as an opportunity for strengthening inclusion of the most vulnerable farmers in the food system (e.g.: DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; Allen, 2010). In Porto Alegre, several farmers explained that local food initiatives and direct selling are central not only to escape the pressure of intermediaries, but also for proposing more sustainable food production and distribution methods. For the respondents, being part of these practices is relatively easier in the metropolitan area, especially when compared to the more isolated smallholders growing in the inner part of the state. Respondents explained that this is due to the high demand for fresh food in the city: *"Here there are more consumers, more opportunities for direct contacts between producers and consumers. [It is through these contacts that] I can present our work: I explain what we are producing, why we are producing in this way, why we are selling in this way*" (Graciela, Interview, 16.03.16).

For similar reasons, direct selling to consumers in the city is attractive to many small-scale family farmers from the metropolitan area and beyond. The agro-ecological producers of the Association of Agro-ecological Producers of Ipê and Antônio Prado (AECIA), for example are based 180 kilometers from Porto Alegre. They explained that they have to sell their organic products within bigger cities as it is difficult to market these products in their area:

"*there [Antonio Prado] we have fewer possibilities to market organic products. Here [in Porto Alegre] the municipality is bigger, the willingness to pay is higher*" (Guilmar, Interview, 30.03.16). Prior research conducted in the area confirm these differences in consumer's behaviours and purchasing power (Cabette & Strohaecker, 2015).

However, our research found that farmers engaging in local food practices in the metropolitan area of Porto Alegre represent a small proportion of the small-scale family farmers present in the region. One explanation that was provided referred to the fact that engaging in local food markets often requires good organizational skills as well as time and labour investments. Several interviewees mentioned that managing time is one of their main challenge: *"the problem is that being at the market is a lot of work. And a lot of time taken from my work in the field. A producer really needs to get organized to be able to come here*" (Eliseo, Interview, *feira modelo* Epatur, 29.03.16). As explained by another farmer selling pineapples in the street, direct selling can involve an increase in work and therefore increase the farmer's need for support from family members and/or occasional workers: "*In this moment, we have people helping us on the farm. How could I do everything alone? When we come here [Porto Alegre], it is a lot of work and we stay here for a week or so, depending on how fast we sell. We sleep in the truck*" (Nilza, Interview, 24.03.16).

A second explanation that was provided is that participating in local food initiatives often requires producers to have a highly diversified production. Some farmers mentioned that participating in initiatives such as farmers' markets was sometimes a problem as they did not have enough products: "*I cannot come here only with my production because I do not have enough to sell […]. The consumers will ask me for something more, for something different. That's why I need to have several types of fruits on my stand*" (Jorge, Interview, 05.04.16). In most farmers' markets of Porto Alegre, when farmers do not have enough to sell the management team of the market might ask them to leave their stand so that it can be used by others. Diversifying production was not a problem for most agro-ecological farmers, who see diversification as the opportunity to farming sustainably while being innovative, as in the case of Silvana, one of the fist farmers of the region to commercialize edible flowers. However, other farmers preferred to specialize themselves in one type of product, which limits their opportunities to participate in several local food activities.

Farmers in the city region often manage to overcome challenges by working together. Farmers who participate in farmers' markets or public procurement programs for example are all usually part of a producers' association. In the case of the National School Feeding Programme (PNAE), they are directly encouraged to collaborate with local authorities, which often prefer to deal with organized groups of producers: "*It is quite difficult for single farmers to take part to the program [PNAE] and distribute their products alone. […] The meetings that we organize also have this goal: to allow them to meet each other, find joint solutions and work together*" (Sandra, *Interview*, 16.05.16). These practical reasons were sometimes accompanied by broader convictions emphasizing the importance of working together. Moreover, it is through these associations that, over time, many of the interviewed farmers had constructed joint demands and developed a culture of resistance and political engagement: "*Our cooperative AECIA taught us that groups need to be organized and strong. Groups should be uma classe unida* (a united class)" (Guilmar, *Interview*, 30.03.16.).

With these examples, we show that only certain small-scale family farmers have the necessary endowments to partake in local food markets. This can be explained by the historical imbalances affecting small-scale family farmers in the region (e.g.: difficulties in

accessing markets, lack of bargaining power) as well as farmers' different capacity to respond to these challenges. Consequently, to support the development of more inclusive local food governance processes, CRFS planning should consider existing structural inequalities and work with family farmers to design better systems for integration and empowerment of a diversity of family farmers (especially the most vulnerable). Inclusive planning should be associated to the creation of specific kinds of structures and mechanisms to allow farmers to access local markets and take part into their governance. This process is not automatic and, as discussed in the following section, local government engagement in the monitoring and redesign of local food practices might also represent a challenge in this perspective.

4.3. Family farmers' involvement in local food governance: (side) effects of local food systematization

Alongside the structural challenges to small-scale family farmers' inclusion in local markets, the research also pointed to barriers emerging from the increasing public management of local food practices. More precisely, we found linkages between efforts to standardise local food and family farmers' participation and control over local initiatives. Drawing on national, federal and municipal legislation, the municipal government of Porto Alegre is working to create harmonised standards and processes with the goal of systematizing local food practices. At the time of the research, as explained by both farmers and municipal employees, state supervision of direct selling initiatives had intensified, especially in terms of sanitary regulations and certification processes for organic production and agro-ecological farmers' markets. More specifically, local authorities had started undertaking a stricter implementation of a municipal resolution on organic farmers' markets establishing, among other, that all organic producers need to hold a certification (SMIC-3-26.12.12). Consequently, the producers that did not have such certifications were being either guided towards adopting new practices or expelled from the market. This was the case of most organic honey producers, who were excluded from the market as the certification process for honey is extremely stringent and most of these regulations are not designed nor adapted for small-scale producers. These regulations also often required several organizational changes that many farmers were unable to meet, such as renovating spaces where food processing occurs or obtaining necessary documents to certify their production. The challenge of lack of scale-appropriate agri-food regulations is not unique to Brazil (McMahon 2013; Miewald *et al.* 2013)

To facilitate these changes, the municipality collaborates with the extension services and organized on-farm trainings. In these workshops, knowledge promoted by municipal employees (e.g.: nutritionists, extension workers) is often presented as the standard to be followed and contradicted farmers' knowledge. This was the case for processing standards for example. During farm visits in the southern area of Porto Alegre, four different families showed the changes they had made in their kitchens to get legally authorized to sell processed food. Some of them had even constructed additional structures. Several respondents were frustrated and critical of such regulations and commented that these were not fitting with their traditions and current situation: "*their goal [referring to municipal employees] is to help but they try to transform what you do. I see how it goes with the producers they are supporting: they go on their farm all the time, they try to impose certain procedures […], they try to teach and to become indispensable*" (Silvana, Interview, 25.05.16).

More generally, in Porto Alegre, increased municipal government attention to local food practices often corresponded to the affirmation of municipal authority which confirmed (or rejected) producers' legitimacy to sell as it deepened its control over the whole production, processing and commercialization of local food. It is important to mention that many of the changes that were requested were often deemed necessary to be consistent with national legislation. At the same time, many farmers perceive these actions to be a form of paternalistic supervision rather than co-management of their activities. In fact, some farmers have decided to keep away from these processes and have found alternative ways to market their products (e.g. direct deliveries, CSA schemes), shaping local food from outside the municipal government apparatus, just has it is happening in other cities (Raja *et al.,* 2014). These forms of resistance, or opting out, corresponded to farmers' reluctance to adapt to general external rules and being excluded from food governance. Many family farmers from the agrarian reform settlements mentioned that being part of formal farmers' markets represented a limitation to their creativity as well as to the possibility of organizing multifunctional activities in these spaces.

Overall, our observations exemplify that even within well-meaning attempts at food localisation farmers might be pushed to adapt to top-down and homogenizing practices. These mechanisms risk making producers dependent on the supervision and the approval of the municipality. They also correspond to an approach in which farmers' traditions, identities and innovation potentials are put aside in favour of standardisation. Above all, the current trajectory of formalisation of local food practices reduces the possibility for family farmers to actively contribute to decision making in local food governance, which increases the gaps between farmers' everyday practices and the regulations being developed. This can be explained by the fact that regulations are often defined extra-locally and that, at the local level, particular modes of engagement between public authorities and family farmers inhibit the active participation of the latter.

5. Conclusion: participatory CRFS planning for inclusive local food governance

Participating in this direct selling initiative is important but we always must link with other collective actions. We stand for the agrarian reform, we defend agro-ecology and that is why we want to be part of the broader project. The challenges that we are facing can be solved only if we think and we act collectively.
Graciela, *Interview*, 16.03.16

Our study in Porto Alegre aimed to get a deeper understanding of the interplay between processes of food localization and small-scale family farmers' integration into food governance. We conducted the research by adopting a CRFS approach to investigate farmers' inclusion within local food practices and in state-led systematization processes. Correspondingly, we firstly sought to deconstruct local food practices and shed light on some of the factors that might limit family farmers' participation. We uncovered that local structural inequalities (e.g. family farmers' location and capacity to organize) influence their possibility to engage in these initiatives, as well as determine the ways in which they get involved in local food governance. Secondly, we looked at linkages between local food policy efforts and family farmers' praxis, attempting to discern mismatches and related implications for the development of a just CRFS. We argued that systematization of local food practices (e.g. regulation and standardization of local products) represents a double-edged sword as it might translate in a decrease in farmers' autonomy and ownership of local practices and the burden of regulations not fit for purpose.

Drawing on these findings, we advanced that CRFS planning can support addressing structural inequalities and power asymmetries in local food governance only if informed by local dynamics such as inclusion/ exclusion mechanisms, historical context, and relations of power. In this context, the CRFS approach involves acknowledging the complexity of local processes and the conflicting interests of agents and collectives that direct them. This approach should invite to increasing open dialogue and collaboration between the different government levels and civil society as well as better framing demands for government accountability. CRFS planning thus requires developing appropriate tools and spaces to ensure that a variety of small-scale family farmers and other stakeholders are incorporated in local food activities and have the possibility to continuously engage in their design and planning processes. Most importantly, capitalizing on Brazilian experiences in participatory governance, it is fundamental that such mechanisms are context specific so that the roles and action arenas of civil society and public authorities are redefined in a constructive manner to ensure quality and results of participation.

Based on our study, participatory mechanisms can be particularly useful to foster exchanges between stakeholders across the city region and beyond, and better explore questions such as: how to make sure that the systematization of local food initiatives is functional to the development of the projects of local farmers? How to limit negative implications of the systematization of farmers' practices such as the conformation of their activities to a fixed set of standards? What if these processes, by limiting the creativity and autonomy of the farmers, are silencing countertrends and innovation to transition towards more sustainable and democratic food practices?

This case study focused on small-scale family farmers however calls for inclusivity should also consider actors beyond farmers. Future research could look at dialogue and co-learning around food, participation in city planning, with attention to the inclusion of most vulnerable of each stakeholders' category. Recalling the arguments of a teacher working in the schools of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST): "*Tutelage is unproductive. It is unproductive for anyone. People need to be engaged in emancipatory activities, people need to deeply understand what is the meaning of these alternatives."* (Anselmo, *Interview*, 17.03.16). From this perspective, food becomes one of the entry points for strengthening community engagement and, drawing on Parnham (2015), the materiality around which a critical city region develops.

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