



PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL PARTICIPATION BY ACTORS OF THE FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY POLICY

Percepção de atores da Política de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional sobre participação social

Percepción de actores de la Política de Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional sobre participación social

Alessandra Karla Oliveira Amorim Muniz

State University of Ceará (*Universidade Estadual do Ceará - UECE*) - Fortaleza (CE) - Brazil

Helena Selma Azevedo

Federal University of Ceará (*Universidade Federal do Ceará - UECE*) - Fortaleza (CE) - Brazil

Letícia de Albuquerque Araújo

State University of Ceará (*Universidade Estadual do Ceará - UECE*) - Fortaleza (CE) - Brazil

Anna Erika Ferreira Lima

Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of Ceará (*Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia do Ceará - IFCE*) - Fortaleza (CE) - Brazil

Maria Marlene Marques Ávila

State University of Ceará (*Universidade Estadual do Ceará - UECE*) - Fortaleza (CE) - Brazil

ABSTRACT

Objective: To analyze the social participation from the perception held by the social actors who discuss and suggest paths towards Brazil's Food and Nutrition Security Policy. **Methods:** Research carried out using the case study methodology, in the period from January to November 2015, in nine municipalities of the state of Maranhão, Brazil, by means of interviews applied to 38 counselors and members of the intersectoral chambers for food and nutrition security, of which 22 represented the civil society and 16 the public sector. The analytical category "social participation" guided the data analysis. **Results:** Social participation was understood as "a mechanism of dialogue and conflict", "exercise of social control", "tool for achievement of the right and realization of society's desires" and "strategy to ensure the return of political propositions to the community". **Conclusion:** The actors perceive social participation as a means of ensuring the construction of the Food and Nutrition Security Policy and the achievement of the right to food by the population, although they also point out limitations on its effective exercise, a fact that will have an impact on other policies, such as the health policy.

Descriptors: Food and Nutrition Security; Social Participation; Public Policy.

RESUMO

Objetivo: Analisar a participação social a partir da percepção dos atores sociais que discutem e indicam caminhos para a Política de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional (SAN). **Métodos:** Pesquisa realizada pelo método estudo de caso, realizado no período de janeiro a novembro de 2015, em nove municípios maranhenses, mediante aplicação de entrevistas semiestruturadas com 38 conselheiros e membros das câmaras intersectoriais de segurança alimentar e nutricional, sendo 22 da sociedade civil e 16 do poder público. A categoria analítica "participação social" norteou a análise dos dados. **Resultados:** A participação social foi percebida como "mecanismo de diálogo e conflito", "exercício de controle social", "instrumento para alcance do direito e realização dos anseios da sociedade" e "estratégia para garantir o retorno das proposições da política à comunidade". **Conclusão:** As percepções dos atores se direcionam para a participação social como um meio de garantir a construção da política de SAN e o alcance do direito à alimentação pela população, porém também sinalizam limitações para o seu efetivo exercício, fato que terá impacto em outras políticas, como a da saúde.

Descritores: Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional; Participação Social; Política Pública.



RESUMEN

Objetivo: Analizar la participación social a partir de la percepción de los actores sociales los cuales discuten e indican caminos para la Política de Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional (SAN). **Métodos:** Investigación realizada a través del método de estudio de caso en el período entre enero y noviembre de 2015 en nueve municipios de Maranhão con la aplicación de entrevistas semiestructuradas a 38 consejeros y miembros de las cámaras intersectoriales de seguridad alimentaria y nutricional siendo 22 de la sociedad civil y 16 del poder público. La categoría analítica “participación social” ha orientado el análisis de los datos. **Resultados:** La participación social ha sido vista como el “mecanismo de dialogo y conflicto”, el “ejercicio del control social”, el “instrumento para el alcance del derecho y realización de los anhelos de la sociedad” y la “estrategia para garantizar el regreso de las proposiciones de la política para la comunidad”. **Conclusión:** Las percepciones de los actores se dirigen para la participación social como medio de garantizar la construcción de la política de SAN y el alcance del derecho de la población a alimentación. Sin embargo también señalan las limitaciones para su ejercicio efectivo que es un hecho que traerá impacto en otras políticas como la de la salud.

Descriptor: Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional; Participación Social; Política Pública.

INTRODUCTION

The fight against hunger and poverty is not a recent phenomenon and remains a regular topic in international discussions in view of its close relation with the progress and development of nations. Thus, it is not surprising that these two issues were raised in the Millennium Development Goals, which emerged in the United Nations Millennium Declaration, aiming to encourage governments to support programs, services and organizations that seek to reduce nutrition insecurity among vulnerable populations⁽¹⁾.

In Brazil, the concept of food security becomes stronger in the 1980s, following the country's re-democratization, with a large participation of the civil society, which is mobilized around the issue of hunger and initiates its association with citizenship⁽²⁾. Spaces such as the VIII National Health Conference, held in 1986, a milestone of the popular participation in the Sanitary Reform movement, at which the First National Conference on Food and Nutrition was held, start up this process of broad debate addressing the Brazilian food and nutrition, and the first proposal of a National System for Food and Nutrition Security^(3,4).

In the same period, as a consequence of the Sanitary Reform, the movement for health promotion was gaining strength in Brazil, so Law 8080/90 makes it explicit in its preliminary notes that health promotion, protection and recovery are integral parts of the health of the population, which is conceived as the result of a set of factors, mentioned as determinants and conditioning factors, in which eating is included⁽⁵⁾.

In this way, health promotion expresses the need to ensure, among other basic needs, food. Nevertheless, health professionals still identify the lack or inadequacy of food as a recurring issue in acting as health promoters⁽⁶⁾.

The understanding of adequate eating is widely comprised in the concept of Food and Nutrition Security (FNS), which has been consolidated from mobilizations such as *Ação da Cidadania* (1992), which culminated in the creation of the National Council for Food and Nutrition Security (*Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional - CONSEA*) in 1993, composed of 1/3 representatives of the public sector and 2/3 of civil society, representing an unpublished space to politicize the discussion about hunger and increase the citizen participation in the formulation and control of public policies^(2,7).

In 2004, the II National Conference on Food and Nutrition Security was held, in which the meaning of the FNS was adopted as the “realization of the right of all to regular and permanent access to quality food, in sufficient amounts, without compromising the access to other essential needs, based on health-promoting eating practices that respect cultural diversity and are environmentally, economically and socially sustainable”⁽⁸⁾.

It is also worth emphasizing other achievements in the FNS field: the unification of the main income transfer programs; the 2006 Organic Law for Food and Nutrition Security (*Lei Orgânica de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional - LOSAN*), which establishes the legal basis for the creation of the National System for Food and Nutrition Security (*Sistema Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional - SISAN*) and the Constitutional Amendment 64/2010, which placed food among the social rights; the creation of the Interministerial Chamber for Food and Nutritional Security (*Câmara Interministerial de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional - CAISAN*) and its correspondents in the states and municipalities; the publication of the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy in 2010; and the Union's efforts to put into effect measures in support of state governments for the implementation of SISAN⁽⁹⁾.

The participation of civil society has been decisive for the inclusion of the food question in the public agenda and the establishment of legal frameworks that demarcate it as a right to be guaranteed by the State, which has given great visibility to Brazil at the international level⁽¹⁰⁾, which is possibly the clearest example among the Brazilian public policies of a construction

carried out through a State and society partnership, represented by technicians and managers from different governmental sectors and social organizations⁽¹¹⁾.

Among the legal frameworks, stands out LOSAN, which establishes that SISAN is ruled by social participation in “formulating, implementing, following up, monitoring and controlling food and nutrition security policies and plans in all spheres of government”⁽⁹⁾. However, such participation may vary according to the interests of and pressure from the various social actors representing the public and private sectors involved in the process of public policy construction. Moreover, other issues related to the socio-political scenario can also influence the implementation of public policies, such as institutional dynamics and political coalitions that determine the priorities in the public agenda^(12,13).

This article proposes to analyze the social participation from the perception held by the social actors who discuss and suggest paths towards the Food and Nutrition Security Policy.

METHODS

This is a qualitative, case study type of research, a methodological design that covers from planning to the analysis of results⁽¹⁴⁾. The study was carried out between January and November 2015 in nine municipalities in the state of Maranhão, Brazil, which joined the Food and Nutrition Security System (SISAN) until 2014; therefore, all municipalities presenting a council, intersectoral chamber and FNS municipal conference.

Thirty-eight members of the Food and Nutrition Security Council (CONSEA) and/or members of the Intersectoral Chamber for Food and Nutrition Security (CAISAN) participated in the study, of which 22 (twenty-two) were representatives of the civil society and 16 (sixteen) of the public sector. Of these, five were members of both CONSEA and CAISAN; eight of CAISAN alone; and three members participated in CONSEA.

For selection of the informants, attendance and protagonism in the discussions and directions in the respective participation spaces were applied as inclusion criterion. In order to apply this criterion, the study had the help of key informants: the presidents of the councils in the state and municipality, and the public managers who presided over the CAISANs, given their the knowledge of the participants in those instances⁽¹⁵⁾. The exclusion criterion was the removal from the activities in the councils and chambers during the period of the research and the impossibility of attending at the place where the interviews were applied.

One of the main epistemological clashes between qualitative and quantitative approaches is the theoretical positioning that understands human life as an interactive and interpretive activity; therefore, the qualitative researcher seeks the understanding, the meaning of the object studied, so that the subjects of the study are intentionally chosen, because what matters for this approach is not the number of subjects, but how deeply they experience the phenomenon under study and their understanding of it⁽¹⁵⁾. Thus, the present research comprised the informants who met the established criteria and guaranteed the inclusion of the different subjects from the two participation spaces studied⁽¹⁶⁾.

For data collection, the semi-structured interview was used, in which the structured questions addressed the identification of the subjects, and the open questions investigated on “what do you understand by social participation?”, “for how long have you been in CONSEA, and what entity do you represent?”, “what does it mean to represent that segment?”, “talk about your career path until you became a councillor in CONSEA”, “do you participate in any other council?”, “have you ever participated in any FNS and/or Public Policy Conference?”, “which CONSEA actions did you actively participate in?”. In order to have the interview data scribed, the study resourced to recording⁽¹⁶⁾ and there was no delimitation of time for the informant to answer the questions.

One researcher carried out the interviews in each municipality, in the physical spaces assigned for the Councils and/or Secretariats that composed the Intersectoral Chambers for Food Security. In some cases, however, the informants had appointments scheduled in the state capital and were interviewed in that occasion.

To perform the analysis of interview data, researchers trained for the activity carried out the transcription. Subsequently, the thematic analysis⁽¹⁶⁾, was initiated, with annotations of keywords and ideas that were correlated, with the focus on the analytical category social participation.

The understanding of the category refers to the possibility of any citizen participating in the decision-making on public policies, configuring such participation as a central element of the democratic exercise^(17,18).

For characterization of the informants, identification data (age, sex, education level and training/occupation) collected during the interview were used, which were tabulated and quantified.

The empirical categories that emerged through the thematic analysis were: “mechanism of dialogue and conflict”, “exercise of social control”, “tool for achievement of the right and realization of society’s aspirations” and “strategy to ensure the return of the political propositions to the community”.

The study obtained approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the State University of Ceará (Approval No. 1001981/2015) and had the informants’ adherence formalized by means of the Informed Consent Form (TCLE)⁽¹⁹⁾.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data on the characterisation of the informants showed that a majority (n=4;63.2%) were between 24 and 46 years old, with a predominance of males and complete higher education (n=25;65.8%).

For a better description of the empirical categories, these were grouped into two thematic blocks: Social participation as interaction between public sector/civil society and return to the community; and social participation as a principle on the guarantee of the right.

Social participation as interaction between public sector-civil society and return to the community

Civil society councillors understand their participation as a way to ensure the return of benefits provided by FNS policy to the community:

“Social participation is always good, in the case of the entities in the conferences, because there we will be defining some things that will come to the municipality in the future. That is how I see social participation” (CONSEA - civil society).

“I understand social participation as a way of, it’s like the projects, actions ... taking these to the people who are there on the base” (CONSEA - civil society).

It is the responsibility of the bases to support their representatives in matters related to the common good, since they have delegated them authority to do so, thus configuring the right and duty to exercise the democratic control⁽²⁰⁾. The ability to represent its base well is essential, as there will be a need to deliberate on actions not yet conjectured by the representative or the ones represented by them⁽²⁰⁾, given that the municipal CONSEA is a privileged space for discussion and deliberation on the FNS policy at a local level⁽²¹⁾.

In this regard, CONSEAs are defined as areas of defense of the interests of the organized civil society, as well as the interests of groups excluded from access to adequate food, which only so can be represented in the FNS policy formulation and management processes.

Thus, in addition to the return to their bases, the informers also perceive participation as a way of collaborating in the construction of public policies and social control by addressing the need to oversee and monitor the policies, as a way to achieve the human right to adequate food and to meet the aspirations of the population:

“I understand that social participation is important so that the subject can, let’s say, evaluate, monitor policies. Social participation in the construction of such policies is important, because just being a user of the policy is not enough, if you do not participate. Policies are not always in line with the aspirations of the population and, when we participate, we have the opportunity to express opinions, to evaluate, to say how we see that policy and how it fits into that particular social group” (CONSEA - civil society).

“It is when the person has indeed the access issue, is participating, the issue of control as well, that councils have that role. Of controlling, monitoring, of participation” (CAISAN - public sector).

Social participation, when referenced as social control, in addition to referring to the surveillance and monitoring relationship between civil society and the State, retakes the need to represent the interests of the community, with the dissemination of information to all, so that the interests of some is not put upon the others⁽²²⁾.

It is important to verify the understanding of councils as spaces where public sector and civil society alternate and interact in proposing actions for the common good, as highlighted in the following testimony:

“Social participation, I use to say that not everyone drives a car, not everyone drives a motorcycle, not everyone is a driver, but everyone is a pedestrian. I usually give this example in the municipalities. I say that not everyone is a driver, but everyone is pedestrian, meaning that not everyone is the public authority, but everyone is civil society, because those who are in the public sector, when they leave the office, or when they are in the office, their son is at school, their son needs health, he needs paved road, he needs basic sanitation. Thus, we are civil society forevermore. So, what do I understand by social participation? It means allowing the society as a whole to contribute with opinions and suggestions... it means demanding, watching, debating, discussing and proposing” (CONSEA - civil society).

Such understanding explicitates the idea that the Brazilian State/civil society relationship is not dichotomous, but considers that the civil society involves social relations constituted by all social classes struggling for hegemony, which is not a homogenized class, and that, together with the political society, it shapes the actions of the State⁽²³⁾.

This understanding is fundamental, given the complexity of individuals and institutions that make up the civil society, and is of great importance for the definition of public policies on health promotion, in which social participation is a condition for selection of priorities based on the real needs of the population, in order to include historically excluded segments of the society^(5,24).

Social participation as a principle on the guarantee of the right

LOSAN defines the adequate diet as “a fundamental right of the human being, inherent in the dignity of the human person and indispensable for the realization of the rights enshrined in the Federal Constitution, and the public sector must adopt the policies and actions that are necessary to promote and ensure food and nutrition security of the population”⁽²⁵⁾. SISAN is the legal provision that ensures this right and, in order to join the system, states and municipalities must create a minimum structure composed by the FNS councils, intersectoral chambers, conferences and plans^(8,25).

The historical and social scenario in which the achievements of the FNS policy begin to take place is marked by contradiction because, as the reconstruction and expansion of democracy occurs, with the creation of institutional spaces of social participation contemplated in the Citizen Constitution, the neoliberal policy, in which rights are denied, is installed in Brazil⁽²⁶⁾.

Policies on health and on food and nutrition security, to cite two basic needs of human life, include the principle of social participation, which is inherent in health promotion. When neoliberal policies prevail, social participation loses part of its potential as an inducer of policies that promote health and quality of life^(27,28).

Thus, the challenges to social participation and its role in guaranteeing the acquired rights are many and complex, ranging from neoliberal policies and incipient democratic culture to the traditional authoritarianism of the Brazilian State^(29,30).

It is probable that one of the findings of the present study is due to the poor democratic culture, contributing to the resistance of participation in the spaces of political discussion and deliberation, which is reflected in the demand for participation of the same individual in several social councils.

Most of the informants (n=22;57.8%) took part in two or more councils, which may represent a hindrance to the full participation, given the difficulty in monitoring all the activities proposed and examining carefully the policy to be discussed. This is liable to favor the reduction of public policies, the legitimation of the interests of capital, and a detachment from the social issue.

“[...] within the work we carry out, we must give our best so that it is not limited to that thing of representing, one has to be present, and being present is the commitment to be participating actively. So I thought it was a lot, there are many of boards and I would like to take part in many of them actively, so, because I could not participate actively, I left it to the person entitled to donate themselves” CONSEA - public sector).

From another perspective, the spaces of social participation are configured as spaces of conflict, where the participants can contribute to strengthen or weaken the exercise of participation⁽³⁰⁾. The councils carry contradictions, since “[...] they can boost the process of participation of organized groups or they can stagnate the feeling of belonging of others, if monopolized by individuals who do not indeed represent the communities that indicated/elected them”⁽³⁰⁾.

Also in the informants’ perception, the participation features this characteristic of being an instrument of dialogue and conflict:

“[...] it is the movement in which society is always seeking, fighting” (CONSEA - civil society).

“[...] social participation is included in our Brazilian Constitution, legally as participatory democracy, and it means to say that it is an instrument of dialogue and conflict, you have to dialogue, but it has to be conflictive [...]” (CONSEA - civil society).

The strengthening of social participation or its fragility, that is, its success or failure, depends on the degree of organization of the civil society⁽²⁹⁾. In this sense, FNS councils stand out as spaces that enable the groups excluded from access to adequate food to participate in the FNS policy formulation and management process, since its composition must have 1/3 of representatives from the public sector and 2/3 from the organized civil society, and should therefore assure the participation of representatives of socially vulnerable segments of the population, that is, groups historically affected by food insecurity, which supposedly confers legitimacy to CONSEAs.

It is necessary, however, to question the qualification of the representatives or their commitment to the ones they represent. Qualification for citizen participation is linked to the concept of democracy and, therefore, to the democratic exercise itself, because it presupposes that citizens participate in the elaboration of decision-making. The councils should be spaces for participation without any form of discrimination, and the councillors, citizens authorized to participate in democracy⁽¹⁷⁾. In this respect, the present study brings a worrying result on how, in some cases, the representatives are chosen in CONSEAs:

“The councillors who are chosen, let’s say, here [...] they are more patronized among mayors. Council, as we have seen in several trainings, is intended to make a defense, it is for social control, it is not to patronize the authorities, [...] but the councillors, when not municipal employees, they provide the municipality with something. And I, in my meetings I always said that, if you do not hold the necessary and sufficient conditions to be a councillor, give it up, I’m sure there will be another one who has the courage” (CONSEA - civil society).

Such procedure reduces the potential of the council, as it confronts some essential characteristics of social participation, understood as a democratic exercise, such as: freedom of participation, active and thoughtful participation, distribution of power

among the community members, representation of the most unequal⁽¹⁷⁾; therefore “the one who participates” is determinant of the type of participation.

There are three types of participation: pseudoparticipation, in the sense of persuasion towards the acceptance of previously taken decisions, not reflecting a real participation; partial participation, in which there is no equal decision-making power among the individuals, and participation may only influence an existing decision, but not determine it; full participation, in which all members participate in the same way, since they have sufficient information and equal decision-making power⁽³¹⁾.

In the scenario of the present study, the exercise of partial participation in FNS councils stands out, as it is verified that the civil society councillors, who should represent and defend the interests of the entities and people they represent, defend their personal interests or legitimize decisions of interest of the public authority, thus contributing to the maintenance of the *status quo* and undermining the potential of CONSEA as a space for defense of civil society’s interests and inclusion of the population groups most vulnerable to food and nutrition insecurity.

As regards the representative bodies such as the Health Council, in addition to defending personal interests, representatives can also support institutional interests in defense of their segments and broad interests on politics, so that such representation can only be guaranteed through the interaction with the bases represented and the involvement and participation of the community⁽³²⁾.

Among some informants of the current study, there is also the understanding of the exercise of social participation as interaction with the bases and defense of rights of the represented:

“Social participation is when we are really included in public policies, we are respected, we are received in a way that satisfies, not the ego, but the social issue itself” (CONSEA - civil society).

“[...] space where we can exercise our citizenship, considering not only our personal side, bringing a reflection beyond the “I”, but with a focus on other people, on how we, as civil society, can contribute to the fight for their rights” (CONSEA - public sector).

This thematic block evidences that social participation in the FNS policy is an object under construction, which requires special attention, given that, in order to be configured as a system in the states and municipalities, SISAN requires a minimum structure that encompasses CONSEA. The creation of such spaces in result of an institutional requirement, however, involves the risk of their disqualification as a space for social participation and decision-making arena of FNS policy, reducing their potential contribution to ensuring the right to food.

When considering food as one of the conditioning factors of health, one understands that its denial as a right generates impacts, including budgetary ones, on the Health Policy, “such as obesity, malnutrition and specific nutritional deficiencies that fall on the health sector”⁽³³⁾. In view of the notorious thematic importance, the National Health Promotion Policy (*Política Nacional de Promoção da Saúde - PNPS*) already foresees actions directed at the accomplishment of Food and Nutrition Security, as well as the theme gains prominence among the publications in the PNPS area⁽³⁴⁾.

The different empirical categories presented are directed towards social participation as a means of ensuring the construction of the FNS policy and the achievement of the right to food by the population. This study also highlight the important aspects of social participation in the FNS policy, which point out advances and challenges for the qualification of participation as a democratic exercise capable of contributing to the consolidation of SISAN and to guaranteeing the right to food.

From the speeches, advances are perceived (such as understanding social participation as a potential for promotion of equity, by enabling representatives to fight for the return of benefits provided by the policy to those represented and an opportunity to collaborate in the construction of public policies); the perception of councils as spaces where the public sector and the civil society alternate and interact in the proposition of actions aiming at the common good; social participation as the power of conflict and dialogue; and CONSEAs and conferences as legitimate spaces for participation.

These are presented as challenges: the poor dissemination of information and insufficient communication between institutions and social actors involved in the FNS policy; the need to qualify the participation; and CONSEAs as spaces of partial participation.

The present study presents limitations such as: the fact that it did not study other aspects related to the practice of social participation by the subjects, nor the difficulty in accessing other researches that investigated the social participation in the FNS area, which could enrich the discussions.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The perceptions held by the actors investigated in the present study are directed towards social participation as a means of guaranteeing the construction of the Food and Nutrition Security (FNS) Policy and the achievement of the right to food by the population.

However, they also indicate limitations to its effective exercise, a fact that will have an impact on other policies, such as the health policy. Thus, it points out the need to strengthen the performance of subjects that are historically detached from the process of construction and execution of public policies.

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First author's address:

Alessandra Karla Oliveira Amorim Muniz
Universidade Estadual do Ceará - UECE
Coordenação do Curso de Mestrado Acadêmico em Nutrição e Saúde (CMANS)
Av. Dr. Silas Munguba, 1700
Bairro: Itaperi
CEP: 60740-903 - Fortaleza - CE - Brasil
E-mail: alessandrakoa@hotmail.com

Mailing address:

Leticia de Albuquerque Araújo
Universidade Estadual do Ceará - UECE
Av. Dr. Silas Munguba, 1700
Bairro: Itaperi
CEP: 60.714.903 - Fortaleza - CE - Brasil
E-mail: leticiadeaa@gmail.com