The Construction of the National Program for the Promotion of Healthy Eating - Conceptual Aspects, Strategic Guidelines and Initial Challenges

A Construção do Programa Nacional para a Promoção da Alimentação Saudável – Aspectos Conceptuais, Linhas Estratégicas e Desafios Iniciais

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ABSTRACT
Food based chronic diseases are already the leading cause of death and disease in Western societies. Portugal, with a million of adult obese and with a sharp increase in social and economic costs associated with this type of pathology, began in 2012 and for the first time, a national strategy in the field of food and nutrition which was called the “National Program for the Promotion of Healthy Eating”. The strategy is based on guidelines proposed by the World Health Organization, the European Commission and also those derived from experiences in countries such as Norway and Brazil and also the retrospective analysis of previous initiatives nationwide. The National Program for the Promotion of Healthy Eating is presented briefly and also some of the main challenges to their implementation.

KEYWORDS: Food policy, Nutrition policy, National programs

INTRODUCTION
Chronic diseases, whose beginning and development is associated to inadequate food habits, are the main cause of death in the world, representing 63% of all deaths in 2008 (1). In Europe, chronic diseases cause more than 8 of 10 deaths, which represent around 77% of the total burden of disease (2). Obesity as a final expression of inadequate energy intake balance towards the body needs, reaches about 1 million Portuguese adults. It is estimated that pre-obesity, which is the preliminary stage of obesity, reaches therefore 3.5 million Portuguese adults (3, 4). This inadequate food intake along with an energetic supply above the needs is proportionally higher among the less economically and socially disadvantaged classes, suggesting that both obesity and economic vulnerability grow together in a high proportion of Portuguese families (1, 5).

If we added to this situation the fact that in many families food insecurity, which means, the difficulty to have access to food or some types of food, could coexist with obesity and malnutrition, it is understandable the current complexity of the situation and the need of an intersectoral thought and strategy at a medium and long term (5, 6).

Towards the epidemiological, economical and social situation that Portugal goes through, the definition of a food and nutrition strategy should be pressing and therefore had been materialized in 2012 with the creation of the National Program for the Promotion of Healthy Eating (PNPAS) (7). PNPAS was approved through the law dispatch nº 4D4/2012 of 3rd January 2012, and has been considered one of the eight priority programs to be developed by the Portuguese Directorate General of Health (DGS) (8). The coordination of this program was attributed to DGS, once according to the law dispatch nº 124/2012 of 19th December, the national coordination of the definition and development of the health programs, as well as the monitoring of the execution of politics and programs from the Ministry of Health were attributed to DGS (9).

The PNPAS was created with the objective of improving the nutritional status of the population, stimulating the physical and economic availability of healthy foods and creating conditions in which the population can give value to them, appreciate them and integrate them on their daily routines. It is aim of this program to provide an adequate food intake and consequent improvement of the citizens nutritional status, which can have a direct impact in the prevention and control of the most prevalent diseases at a national level (cardiovascular disea-
The Health and Nutritional Policies in the Scope of European Policies and Strategies

Currently, food and nutrition are considered to be key elements in the definition of objectives, strategies and recommendations in several programs and policies, not only in the World Health Organization (WHO) but also in the European Commission (EC). At the WHO level, in the past few decades, several strategic documents have been developed, aiming to support member states in the definition of policies that are targeted to change food intake and physical activity among the European citizens. Once the growth of chronic diseases, which is associated to an inadequate food intake, affects more than a third of the European population, and that at a global level, it is estimated that 60% of premature deaths are caused by these diseases, the promotion of healthy eating has assumed as a priority among the WHO policies.


From the reading of these documents it is possible to frame a set of objectives and action guidelines that begin with: a) evaluation of the food and nutritional status of the population and their social and economic determinants; b) multisectoral intervention strategies that move away even more from the interventions for the improvement of citizens knowledge and gradually integrate regulation proposals about the availability and accessibility to foods, and to the c) establishment of monitoring systems and development of process indicators. Recently, the health policies, namely the food and nutrition policies started to assume the impact of social and economic disparities in diet.

In this sense and according to the general action guidelines of the new action plan for food and nutrition policies of the WHO, the “WHO European Action Plan for Food and Nutrition Policy 2014-2020” (WHO European Region, 2013) (14), it was suggested the growing integration of the human rights principles, in particular the right to food and the principles of the guaranty of the universal access to adequate foods, and therefore to promote equity in the proposed strategies. These more recent documents propose for the next few years, a set of four priority objectives:

1) to reinforce the surveillance, monitoring and data assessment related to health, nutritional status and their determinants and trends;
2) to reduce the risk factors’ exposition for chronic diseases that are related to inequalities and that could be modified by food intake, through the creation of environments that promotes a healthy eating;
3) to reinforce and to target the health systems in order to considered the prevention and disease control associated to an inadequate food intake, the malnutrition and the micronutrient deficiency as priorities in the primary health care, ensuring the universal coverage of health care, and at last;
4) to stimulate the adoption of the “health in all policies” approach, in order to build intersectoral alliances and to promote the capability and involvement of the citizens in the promotion of activities related to healthy eating (14, 15).

Among these documents it is well seen the plea to intersectoral and transversal strategies to all governmental sectors, to the private sector and to the civil society, integrating and mentioning the principle of “health in all policies”. It is also sensed the need of interventions supported by changes in the food systems, in order to promote sustainable consumption including economic development and fostering the creation and maintenance of jobs.

The Nutritional Policies in Portugal - Short Historical Evolution

Although the PNIFAS, approved in 2012, represents in Portugal the first national program to the promotion of a healthy eating, several efforts were made since the 70s in order to formulate and implement a national strategy of food and nutrition. The first step for the formulation of a national policy of food and nutrition was made in 1976 with the creation of the Centro de Estudos de Nutrição (CEN) (Centre for Studies in Nutrition) that came up to bridge the need to get data about the food intake and the nutritional status of the Portuguese population (19). Along with the development of studies related to data assessment about food and nutrition, also in the 70s the first national campaign of nutrition education had its beginning “Saber comer é saber viver” ("to know how to eat is to know how to live"), for which it was developed the first food guide to the Portuguese population, the “Rodos dos Alimentos” (Food Wheel). Later, in 1980, it was established the Conselho Nacional de Nutrição (CANE) (National Council of Food), after known as Conselho Nacional de Alimentação e Nutrição (CNAN) (National Council of Food and Nutrition), aiming to formulate and implement a food and nutrition policy, that nevertheless was not achieved (20).

Simultaneously to these initial political steps in the area of food and nutrition, emerge the first documents reflecting about the strategic lines of thought to the formulation of a food and nutrition policy in Portugal. These strategic documents were essentially proposed by Gonçalves Ferreira and later by Emílio Peres, Amorim Cruz, among others (21-25). The political interest in the implementation of a food and nutrition policy was however less obvious during the 90s by several reasons, such as: the entrance of Portugal in the European Economic Community (EEC) and the attempt of creating an open market with the minimum of regulation. Nutrition education, especially in schools, was probably the only area in which investments continue in this period (26). Also in the 90s and precisely in 1997, food recommendations were published to the Portuguese population by the CNAN (27). In the late 90s and at the beginning of the new millennium, arise the need of the guaranty the hygiene
and food safety, due to the food crisis of the 90s, which occupied the political agendas in the scope of food and nutrition (28). In 2005 and resulting from the political recognition at an international level that obesity was one of the most serious problems of public health, it was observed once again a new political investment in the nutrition field in Portugal, and therefore been implemented in the same year the National Plan the Fighting of Obesity 2004-2010 (29). In 2007 and following the signing of the “European Charter on Countering Obesity” (WHO European Region, 2006) (11), was created the Platform Against Obesity, as a Division within the Directorate General of Health (DGS), representing the first approach of an intersectoral policy aiming to promote healthy eating, although with specific intentions in the fight against obesity (30). Therefore with the Platform Against Obesity there were raised the bases for the launching of the first National Action Plan on Food and Nutrition, that came up in 2012, as presented below.

National Program for the Promotion of Healthy Eating - Strategic Guidelines

In the framework of the PNAPS, were enclosed several guidelines and strategic options. The proposals made by the WHO and the EC, already described, and also the ones resulting from the Portuguese international experience in working groups such as the High Level Group on Nutrition and Physical Activity from DG Sanco; from the experience of the developing of different national proposals since 1976 that culminated with the creation of the Platform Against Obesity in DGS; from the experiences held in two countries Norway and Brazil, with great traditions in the implementation of policies and strategies in the field of food and nutrition; and still from the public earshot that DGS promoted to listen stakeholders and interested parties. All of them contributed to the final improvement of this strategy.

The PNAPS presents five main objectives: a) To increase the knowledge about food intake of the Portuguese population as well as their determinants and consequences; b) To modify the availability of certain foods namely in schools, workplaces and in public settings; c) To inform and enable citizens to purchase, prepare and store healthy foods, in special to the most disadvantaged people; d) To identify and promote transversal actions that encourage the consumption of high nutritional quality foods in an intersectoral and integrated way with other sectors, namely agriculture, sports, environment, education, social security and municipalities; e) To improve the qualification and way of action of several professionals that by their actions may induce foods intake (7).

Critical Analysis and Conclusions

The current epidemiological, social, and economic profile of the Portuguese population suggests integrated and intersectoral answers to such complex problems as the ones from the food and nutrition scope. Taking into account the five main areas of action proposed by the PNAPS, it will be possible a critical reflection about each one of them.

1) Decision making and the choice of the best strategies implies updated and quality data. In the case of nutrition policies are fundamental updated data on food consumption, its evolution and its relation to demographic and geographic profiles of the population. Unfortunately the current available data is far from answering to these needs. The last national food survey with direct intake data is strongly outdated, because it is from 1980. The indirect data of food consumption obtained by the Food Balance Sheets (FBS) and from the Family Household Budgets (FHB) systematically allow, along with some known deviations, to draw the consumption trajectories. These data, together with direct food consumption data obtained by partial studies, allow although in a imperfect way, to identify priority areas. In spite of the budget difficulties, it is necessary to implement an evaluation and monitoring system to follow the food consumption. A system that systematically and rapidly can track food intake variations as well as their distribution and evolution through time. This tool should be more practical in relation to data collection and updating. It should provide internal decision-making, but also allow the comparability at European level. The stability of the methodology employed should also enable a better understand of time trends in food intake. After that, in the past, several complex institutional tools were used, and the data collection presented a great time lag in relation to the results disclosure. The processes need now to be even quicker, also integrating already existing structures, services and health professionals without putting aside the quality.

2) In the last few years, several proposals came up in the European nutritional policy setting, that attempt to modify the availability of certain foods, namely in school environments, workplaces and other public settings. The change of the food availability in school environments has been considered an important area of action, where Portugal has been taking a very active role. In this field of action, the Directorate General of Education (DGE) and the PNAPS have been producing a partnership alliance that allows the regulation, among other areas, of the food offer in the school environment. The next step will be to improve the capacity of monitoring the implementation of guidelines and to know even more about the impact of the different proposed models. At the same time recent intervention on food prices, through the direct taxation on certain food products, as the examples of Denmark and Hungary, suggest new regulation paths of the food offer that need to be closely studied (31).

3) To inform and empower citizens to the purchase, preparation and storage of healthy foods, in particular among the most disadvantage groups, means a clear option in strategies that use adapted education materials to low levels of literacy. But also to recognize the reduced interest and capacity of these groups to learn the most classic way of learning. And the understandings that in a new communication era, both entertain and information circulate even more in interrelated formats and areas. A food and nutrition policy should be able to establish a compromise among the strategies that promote the capacity and the autonomy of citizens to make adequate food choices with strategies that enable the creation of healthy food environments considering however, that the food choices depend mainly from the will of the citizen.

4) A food and nutrition policy needs to be able to establish alliances, partnerships, and intersectoral actions, namely among the different government sectors, the private sector and the civil society. So, the intersectoral action is one of the main challenges of food and nutrition policies. These alliances and partnerships depend on governance stability and compromises at a medium term that overcome legislatures. These policies also need clarity in the objectives and transparency of processes, planning and cooperation routines among the different government sectors and other partners. The existence of a national action plan on food with clear and auditable objectives is one of basis of this process. The qualification and the way of action of different professionals that by their activity can influence knowledge, attitudes and behaviors on the food arena, are crucial to the success of any strategy. At this level it is necessary a double intervention. There is a need to capacitate professionals external to health but that influence food intake, for instance at a municipality level or in the education area; and to capacitate health professionals that are not experts on nutrition but that often collaborate in this kind of actions. One of the main criticisms made to the teaching of health sciences, in the last few years, is the incapacity of graduating professionals with the sense of leadership and public intervention in the society, in particular in the areas that determine and influence the health of the population. It is expected that the PNAPS could encourage this kind of articulation among the needs of human resources with sense of leadership and public intervention capacity along with the academic and professional qualification.

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