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Physical/geographical and social access: the neglected dimensions of food security

Food poverty and food insecurity are increasingly recognized as social problems in western societies. Although sometimes used almost interchangeably, these concepts differ in range, with food insecurity focusing more on forms of provision and diet composition, and food poverty more on issues of access and income. Still, both conceptual frameworks share a concern with the relation between food consumption and inequality.

Yet, talking about food necessarily entails addressing sociability and social relations. Food is a key element of social participation; it has symbolic meaning as a marker of inclusion/exclusion from socially acceptable activities and common practices. In fact, be it involuntary or self-imposed, withdrawal from activities such as eating in or out with family and friends can be conceived as limiting social participation and excluding individuals from active citizenship and common food practices. Therefore, contemporary definitions have come to consider social participation as a core dimension of food (in)security.

In the current context of rising inequalities (namely in terms of income) the impacts of food poverty have been accentuated, namely in countries hit hard by austerity policies. While it is clear that there was an overall reduction in consumption since the beginning of the crisis, some reports have pointed out specific shifts in diet composition and preferences. However, less is known concerning food practices, namely how social participation around food changed (ie. the ability to provide hospitality or to eat out occasionally), how this affects the lives of individuals and families living in different places.

In this chapter we address changes in sociability around food in the Age of Austerity. We will do so by investigating the multiple experiences of food poverty among food-insecure households. We draw on qualitative data from an ERC funded project, namely on 45 semi-structured interviews with individuals living in urban and rural areas of Portugal.