COIMBRA REGION PORTUGAL

FACILITATING STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS FOR TERRITORIAL ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

This food policy snapshot is based on an interview with Paula Silvestre, Administrative and Financial Director, and Nuno Lopes, Economic and Social Development of the Coimbra Region Intermunicipal Community. Written by Cécilia Delgado, NOVA University Lisbon, CICS.NOVA, NOVA FCSH.

In Portugal, the Intermunicipal Communities (ICMs) correspond to a territorial unit composed of a set of municipalities. In administrative terms, the ICMs manage the economic, social, and environmental development strategies of the territories covered, prioritizing the coordination of municipal investments and community funds.

The Coimbra Region Intermunicipal Community (ICM RC) comprises 19 municipalities, with a total of 43,000 inhabitants (INE, 2021) in a territory of 4,300 km² (average of 107 inhabitants/km²). The municipalities exhibit very heterogeneous population characteristics. For example, there is a low level of education despite having one of the oldest universities in Europe, the University of Coimbra, founded in 1219. There is also a substantial dichotomy between coastal vs. inland and urban vs. rural municipalities.

In 2017, a forest fire of dramatic proportions affecting 7 of the 19 municipalities in the Coimbra Region (RC) resulted in more than 50 casualties, the loss of animal life, and thousands of hectares of burnt land and infrastructure. The natural disaster led the ICM RC to launch climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts, with a perspective for economic and social development based on the endogenous potential of the territory. Since 2018, the ICM RC has coordinated climate and food initiatives, particularly the ClimAgir project and the Coimbra Regional Community of Gastronomy award.

The ClimAgir project is one of the elements of the Intermunicipal Climate Change Adaptation Plan (PAAC), prepared by the ICM RC and the University of Coimbra. Between 2021-2022, the Coimbra Region was awarded the EUROPEAN REGION OF GASTRONOMY award by GCAT, the International Institute of Gastronomy, Culture, Arts, and Tourism, based in Barcelona.

ENABLERS

The 2017 fires created a wave of collective sensitivity towards the importance of environmental education and climate change mitigation, culminating in the PAAC.

The ICMs have their own line of funding, the Pacts for Territorial Development, where finance is negotiated directly with the central government regarding the intended investments in each European Union community framework. In this sense, ICMs have a mechanism to overcome the financial difficulties that most Portuguese municipalities face.

For each European Union community framework, a strategy is defined by a council of local stakeholders (public institutions, municipalities, non-profit organizations, regional scientific and technological entities, and businesses). It is up to the local participants to include such strategic topics as climate, forestry, food, or agriculture. Hearing the different priorities of the diverse stakeholders builds trust and adds richness to the processes but requires time, awareness, and deconstructing pre-existing ideas.

BARRIERS

Policy alignment is a challenge that requires dialogue and time, something that ICMs and municipalities cannot easily coordinate within the short and overlapping deadlines for funding applications. When several lines of funding are launched by the central government at the same time, there is a risk that the parties involved develop similar projects, with no coordination of actions on the ground or over time. Further sectoral policymaking within ICMs continues to challenge public policy alignment.

Communication between different stakeholders is also a challenge, especially given some farmers’ low level of education. According to statistical data from 2019, the average age of a Portuguese farmer is 64 years old, and 52% of farmers have only four years of schooling. Communication needs to be adjusted based on participants’ needs. Examples include the need for a translation service, particularly in areas such as biodiversity and food security.

Finally, administrative boundaries between the different ICMs remain an obstacle. For example, managing resources such as forests and agricultural infrastructure is not always compatible between neighboring territories.

FOOD POLICY HIGHLIGHTS

The ClimAgir project aims to communicate and raise awareness, particularly among young people, on climate change mitigation and adaptation measures. This project was recognized as a FOOD PRACTICE project by the Interreg Europe Programme, the Operational Programme for Sustainability and Efficiency in the Use of Resources, Portugal 2020, and the Cohesion Fund financed the project.

A budget of €2.5 million ($2.65 million) has been allocated for a wide range of initiatives following the European Region of Gastronomy award. Such as a Gastronomy Passport, restaurant vouchers, and the Taste Coimbra Region Menu. The restaurant voucher grants a discount of €15 (15% of a meal from €30.00 or more. Two thousand vouchers were made available, representing an investment of €30,000 ($31,750).

In the coming years, we want to understand how to circularly connect waste and inputs from different sectors to foster further economic growth for the region.