



## Feeding Sustainable Cities Association - Boosting food transition in Portugal since 2018

In 2018 a steering group of 3 Portuguese food champions founded a network (google – group forum) called - Alimentar Cidades Sustentáveis (Feeding Sustainable Cities in English). The founders came from different backgrounds, localities, and affiliations (academia, local and national government), with a true aim of complementarity and diversity. Since its very beginning the network aggregates, from different localities in Portugal, individuals, organizations, central and local governments, representing a broad range of sectors and actors of the national food system. This is precisely its main goal, to bring together all the food actors to share pluralistic and evidence-based knowledge, as a tool for better public formulation and advocacy. Today the network (forum) joins more than 600 members (2024) contrasting to roughly 40 members in June 2018. Although very inclusive, it represents a tiny part of all the activities developed by the nowadays formal not-for-profit association. The institutionalization of the networks brought new possibilities for activism, public visibility, and access to funding, but at the same time the need to maintain a heavy bureaucratic system which is a hard challenge due to the lack of funding to keep it running. In addition, most of the activities are voluntary which is an additional constraint due to the lack of fair payment, professionalization, and sometimes technical competencies of the staff. Still, there is plenty of room to celebrate, as since the beginning of 2023, four projects and activities were funded, among several invitations to talk, petitions signed, and webinars where relevant national key speakers participated. Even with limited resources, things keep being done because inclusion and respect for diversity are central to ACSA vision. In conclusion, if we want to work for a fair food system that works for all, we need to start by acknowledging that the process needs to be fair to our team as well.

*Cecilia Delgado - CICS.NOVA - Interdisciplinary Center of Social Sciences I NOVA.FCSH I Universidade Nova de Lisboa I ACSA - ceciliadelgado@fsh.unl.pt*

*With: Paula Silva and João Pratas – Alimentar Cidades Sustentáveis Associação - ACSA - <https://acsa.org>*

### 1. Introduction and background

In 2018 a steering group of 3 Portuguese food champions founded a network (google – group forum) called - Alimentar Cidades Sustentáveis (Feeding Sustainable Cities in English). The founders came from different

backgrounds namely zootechnical engineering, rural economy and urban planning even, so effectively working on food-related issues such as food procurement in a local government, short food circuits in the central government and food governance and urban food systems in the academia. The complementarity of backgrounds and practices was key to

settling out a diverse network. Since its very beginning the network aggregates, from different localities in Portugal, individuals, organizations, local and central government, representing a broad range of sectors and actors of the national food system. In June 2018 the network joined 40 members, mostly persons related to the professional group of the 3 food champions that founded the network. Then quickly the network grew to 400 members in 2022 in a snowball process. During the four first years (2018-2022) in addition to extensive information exchange through the google-group forum, the main activities of the network were: the publication of the e-book “Alimentar Boas Práticas – da Produção ao Consumo” (National Innovative Practices: From production to Consumption in English); monthly webinars (+25 in two years) carried on under the umbrella of two thematic working groups one on - Short Food Chains, and another on Governance, Policies, and food strategies; a resource centre (+300 documents) available for free on the website; science dissemination through fact sheets. The network was also actively involved with national and international organizations and campaigns, namely with the Glasgow Declaration for Food and Climate. The translation to Portuguese of the website and declaration was done by a steering group of the network (2020), that also actively campaigned and documented three case studies (2022) available on the website. The declaration was signed in Portugal by three cities and one region.

Since 2020 a core group of this network promoted more than 25 debates involving roughly 80 food speakers coming from the central government, local governments, NGOs, civil society, and the private sector.

## 2. From a network to legal institutions

Despite its huge national and somehow international visibility, the network was not able to receive funding for its activities because it was not institutionalized. This is why in November 2022 a steering group of

15 Portuguese food champions, out of the 500 members (2023) of the network, decided to set up a formal Association (ACSA – Alimentar Cidades Sustentáveis Associação in Portuguese) to carry out more specific activities such as awareness raising campaigns; training; technical assistance; advocacy for policy change. The partnership with the Santo António civil parish, in the heart of the city of Lisbon, allowed the costs associated with the physical installation of the headquarters to be covered.

ACSA's priorities are to campaign for a holistic food system approach. This is done at this point by raising awareness, sharing information, and building knowledge based on scientific – evidence. ACSA want to make clear that all dimensions of the food system are interconnected, including policies, economy, society, health, and environment, but also food production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste reduction, including climate change, biodiversity, and access to land. So far it is not the case as intensive production is still leading the political agendas and silos vision is the rule.

ACAS is actively involved with national and international organizations and campaigns such as the Glasgow Declaration for Food and Climate, or the Protein Transition in Portugal.

## 3. Defining a common vision through a strategic plan

In 2023 the Association launched its Strategic Plan 2023-2028. The plan was elaborated by its board of Directors composed of 5 members with different expertise backgrounds and levels of experience. In March 2023 the Strategic Plan was presented and approved with slight changes by its founders' members.

All members agreed that ACSA aim is to promote a holistic vision of sustainable food systems. Considering that all dimensions of the food system are interconnected, namely by policies, the economy, society, health, the

environment, the territory, but also the food chain, climate change, biodiversity, or access to land. With this in mind, the association wants to be a benchmark for the development of sustainable food strategies over the next five years.

In addition, three fundamental values were defined as key: (1) Transparency and Ethics - namely our internal and external communication; (2) Independence i.e. actions and positions will not depend on ideological or partisan influence or pressure; (3) Inclusive Communication - whenever possible, knowledge should be accessible to different audiences, which implies information in Portuguese and the adoption of communication standards adapted to the target audiences.

The Plan consists of five strategic axes and respected measures. They are briefly described below:

#### *1 - Fostering a holistic vision of sustainable food systems*

Measure 1 – Partner with organizations that assist ACSA in promoting a holistic vision of sustainable food systems

Measure 2 – Strengthen the holistic vision of sustainable food systems

#### *2 - Raising awareness and empowering sustainable food systems*

Measure 1 – Promoting Awareness of Better Sustainable Food Systems

Measure 2 – Building skills for better sustainable food systems

#### *3 - Building and disseminating knowledge*

Measure 1 – Knowledge building on better sustainable food systems

Measure 2 – knowledge dissemination on better sustainable food systems

#### *4 - Networking and Communication*

Measure 1 – Strengthen ACSA's visibility and representativeness on national and international territory

Measure 2 – Create communication channels with the ACSA and the wider community

#### *5 - Internal management and resources*

Measure 1 – Internal management

Measure 2 – Human and funding resources

Axes 1, 2, and 3 resume the main vision of ACSA which is to build a food system that works for all. This is done by, sharing and enhancing awareness, but also empowering food actors regarding the willingness to raise awareness and empower sustainable food systems, different projects, and activities were developed. For example, as part of the activities of the project Raising Urban Planners' awareness for integration better food and agriculture-related measures into Climate Strategies and Plans" 10 workshops in different architecture and public studies degrees were done, involving roughly 200 university students. Similarly, the project Blue Picnic – on board of Climate Action involved and raised awareness among 57 students and their teachers in addition to 9000 people from social networks. Moreover, some projects go beyond awareness and create knowledge as in the case of the project Raising urban planners' awareness which final output will be a manual for food planners in partnership with the National Territorial Department, a central service of the State with administrative autonomy, within the government area of Territorial Cohesion.

Fostering a holistic vision of sustainable food systems together with dis-

seminating knowledge is also at the core of the webinars carried on under the umbrella of two thematic working groups, one on - Short Food Chains, and another on Governance, Policies and Strategies. In addition, ACSA intends to continue and strengthen the activities developed since 2018 by the Sustainable Cities Food Forum, namely: sharing information and knowledge through the Sustainable Cities Food Network Website Resource Centre, publishing publications, holding face-to-face events and holding webinars, etc.

#### **4. How this is done - the association governance structure**

The governance structure of the association comprises a board of directors, an assembly board, and a fiscal council, counting 14 members. Interestingly enough, they cover all the sectors: 4 are academically affiliated; 4 of them work in the national or local governments; 5 of them work in the private sector or are freelancers and finally 1 come from the third sector. In addition, all members have complementary disciplinary backgrounds that range from agronomy, geography, landscape architecture, biology, politics, urban planning, rural economy, and accountability to name a few. Despite the 14 members being gender balanced, the board of directors is quite unbalanced as 4 out of the 5 members are women, including the leader who is the only one with an academic affiliation. The remaining 4 members work in 2 different local governments and the other 2 are freelancers. It needs to be highlighted that all the managing work done by the board of directors is for free, however, this was safeguarded in the Ordinance that regulates the association, the members of the board can be paid for other activities, for example, if involved in a funded project.

Currently, there are 57 affiliated members. Each member pays an annual fee of 20 Euros (individual) or 100 Euros if it is a collective. The members can participate in the annual meetings and decide which activities should be carried on, based on the strategy and annual activities Plan proposed

by the board of directors.

#### **5. Who are the affiliated members?**

Despite the effort to bring together all the sectors and territories, more than half of the members live in the metropolitan region of Lisbon (34) with 57 members. Two members are collectives – ACTUAR and Terra Sintropica. Gender balanced, slightly more women's than men's (31/55). All members have a university degree, which is not aligned with the food and agricultural mainstream scenario. This is a constraint regarding the representation of all food stakeholders that ACSA is trying to fix without success so far.

#### **6. How the activities are being carried on: Thematic working groups - voluntary-based**

A fair number of activities are being carried on by the Working Groups (WG). Those groups bring together people who are experts or have an interest in a specific entry point of the food system. The first WG, with a focus on Short Food Circuits, started in 2020. Then in 2021, a second one arose dedicated to - Governance, Policies, and Strategies (WG – GPE).

Today two more groups have been activated, one on "Food and Health" and another one on "Cities and Urbanism" and the short-chain thematic group has evolved to "Innovative transition territorial Initiatives".

Those two new groups turned out from an open call for volunteers in 2024 that received 9 applications. Volunteers were aggregated by main interests, that often result from their professional activities or research interests. At the beginning of their activities, they are supported by someone from the board, in order to help them to find their interest that should be aligned with the Association mission and strategy. Still, in a short time, it

is foreseen that a leader will emerge to coordinate the group.

The two oldest groups developed different activities such as webinars, for example, the Food Transition Territorial Initiatives WG dedicated the last webinar to the meat and fish short food circuits, and the WG - Governance, Policies, and Strategies last webinar, was dedicated to discussing the impact of European Election on the Food Systems.

The WGs have the autonomy to decide which topics are discussed and worked out in their activities, still, they should take their themes as a starting point, to avoid overlapping with the remaining thematic groups. They are called to collaborate with the board on the writing of policy or position papers. They are also kindly invited to find funding to sustain their activities and to collaborate with other thematic groups. This is so far one challenge.

In addition, there is a small team working on the topic of communication. This voluntary team is in charge of the two-month newsletter dedicated to disseminating the main activities carried on by the working groups or events where ACSA is represented.

Although with different degrees of engagement, around 20 volunteers are involved in the WGs, communications, and members management.

## 7. The open forum

One of the activities with a wider and longer impact (it has been active since June 2018) is the google – group forum, which brings together more than 600 food actors from all over the country and a few from Portuguese-speaking countries such as Brazil or Mozambique. The main aim is to share information and knowledge as a way to build collective knowledge and a community of practice, as a tool to improve individual and collective decisions and hopefully better public policies. The idea is to broaden

the understanding of the diversity of sectors and actors, across the food system. Almost all information is shared in Portuguese. Information ranges from events, publications, relevant food regulations, etc. The target is very broad as it should include all food actors. This is quite relevant as the central concept of ACSA's vision is to bridge the gap between, remarkably, the academia and other food actors, such as civil servants or local rural farmers. Despite the effort some stages of the food chain are still missing as professional farmers. The google group forum is an element of continuity between the network and the association that continues to federate new members. Participation is open and free to all the food actors wanting to join.

## 8. Projects and activities since 2023

Since the beginning of 2023, four projects have been founded. A brief presentation of each one below.

### 8.1. Raising Planners Awareness (2023-2024)

The project aims to raise awareness among urban planners about the integration of food and agriculture measures into planning tools. The campaign took the format of 10 workshops targeting architecture and planning students from all over the country and from different academic levels (undergraduate, master's and doctoral). In addition to raising awareness among urban planners, the main objective of the workshops was to collect contributions to feed a toolkit on how to better integrate food into climate territorial planning.

The targets of the toolkit are all the national schools of architecture and planning and the master's and doctoral programmes in urban studies, as well as the urban planning departments and relevant policymakers of Portugal's 308 municipalities, the National Association of Architects and



the National Union of Planners. The Ministry of National Territories provided the technical-scientific validation and will contribute to the dissemination of the manual through its social media networks.

So far, the main challenge has been to make students and teachers of architecture aware that food planning should not be an alien part of their professional duties. However, this awareness-raising campaign needs to be maintained in the future, as the subject is almost ignored among professionals. The knowledge gathered in the toolkit for architects and planners will feed new training and awareness campaigns. The publication is expected to be available in November 2024. The project received a grant from Food for the Planet, managed by Sustain, a UK-based not-for-profit organisation.



Figure 1 – Workshop at Aveiro University (2023)

### 8.2. *Blue Picnic – Onboard of Climate Action (2023)*

The project's core was to link climate-friendly food (salt marsh halophyte plants) and dishes with climate change involving the Students of Culinary and Pastry Course from the Moita Professional School. The project took place in Salinas do Samouco, Tagus Estuary, Alcochete (outskirts of Lisbon) in October 2023. The project involved various activities such as climate change, mitigation, adaptation, and its relationship with food; a Guided visit to an agroecological site where edible salt marsh plants grow; Learning about citizen science tools, to map seagrass and other “blue carbon” flora; Show-cooking of climate-friendly recipes.

The project was co-financed by FoodWave. ACSA coordinated the project in partnership with the association ‘Bora Ambiental’, the Municipality of Alcochete’, with the collaboration of Salina Greens and Maria das Ervas (chef). Additional support was given by Fundação das Salinas do Samouco, ALGAplus, and the Lusophone Blue Carbon Network.

Overall, the project impacted 75 people (students, teachers, project team, and partners) in addition to 9,000 people reached by social networks.

The main lesson learned so far is that working with multiple stakeholders on a common theme creates synergies and fosters new partnerships. It is also clear that investing in social media content (using video, animation and photos) and actively promoting it to audiences has a huge impact that goes beyond the participants in the activities.



Figure 2 - Project Communication (2023)

### 8.3. On the table of the protein transition (2024)

The project aims to put the need for a protein transition in Portugal on the public and political agenda. The process started with an invitation from the WWF national office to organise an event to discuss how this transition could be achieved. The meeting (April 2024) brought together around 40 food stakeholders representing different power groups such as public administration, academia, the private sector and the third sector/civil society. They also represented the different stages of the food chain, i.e. production, distribution, consumption, transformation and waste, and the food sectors, i.e. meat, fish, cereals, rice, pulses, fruit and vegetables and dairy products. The group made 24 recommendations, grouped into five dimensions: governance, food literacy, food procurement, economic incentives and territory. The final outcome is a petition

already signed by a significant number of national organisations willing to express their support. In a joint campaign with partner organisations, namely the National Vegetarian Association, the petition will be presented to the main parties in the national parliament to hopefully make a political impact.



Figure 3 - workshop with food actors (2024)

### 8.4. A protocol with the main city parish of Lisbon to develop a Food Policy Council (2024)

The Santo António civil parish is at the core of Lisbon city and is as well the headquarters of ACSA. The negotiation to develop a project in the parish took a year and is now finally signed (summer 2024). The main aim of this two parties' protocol is to develop a Food Policy Council which will bring together all the food actors based on the parish willing to build a vi-

sion for a healthy and fair food system. This Food Council will participate as well in other aims established by the protocol such as food waste and organic waste recycling strategy and training and capacity-building of local agents and other stakeholders on sustainable food systems. Overall, the parish aims to foster territorially based approaches regarding climate change, food waste, and healthy eating environments. Narrow collaboration with other local associations is planned to join forces, get all inhabitants involved, and seek funding to implement projects. The process will start in September 2024.

### 9. Societal commitment – Petitions and participation in debates

ACSA has been invited by several national organizations to support and subscribe petitions and letters, notably: a petition to support the preservation of the national agricultural land and the national ecological reserve, which are being threatened by the political willingness to transform them into social housing (2023); a petition to a New National Plan to Promote Plant Protein (2024); or a Letter to the PEPAC – Strategic PAC Plan 2023-2027 managing national authority.

In addition, the Association is often invited to participate in public events all over the country such as the international Food Day events, or talks regarding climate change, food and other thematic interconnected with the food system.

### 10. Lessons learned and challenges

Since its beginning in the summer of 2018 as an informal network of food actors, the network has evolved into a legal organization. With this shift, new opportunities arose, such as funding to develop activities and new partnerships. If today the concept of a holistic food system is in the national food actors' mindsets and agendas, this happens due to years of

sharing information and knowledge as a way to build collective knowledge and a community of practice. This being said the main lesson learned is related to the time involved in the process. Any change takes time in order to be consistent.

Although having public and peer recognition the day-to-day activities of the association are hard to conciliate with other members activities. The diverse spectrum of volunteers being an important asset is still not easy to articulate. Young members and old ones have different priorities and expectations regarding their collaboration. Young members are looking for more permanent and played positions. The oldest ones are mostly interested in being part of the debate. Still without applying for funding the future of the association can be problematic because no permanent human resources can be allocated. This is a challenge that needs to be managed in the near future.

In the end, much energy is needed to bring people together at the same table. There is a permanent need to manage different expectations from young and oldest members and various members' backgrounds spanning from scientists, activists or civil servants. And this may be the most relevant conclusion i.e., if we want to create a fair food system that works for all, we need to start by understanding collectively our differences, values and agendas as a way to build a more robust activism.

### Additional Resources:

ACSA (2023). Strategic Plan 2023-2028 (in Portuguese). Link <https://acsa.org/documentos-acsa/> (accessed in September 2024)

Delgado, C. (2019). Feeding Sustainable Cities Platform reshaping the Portuguese foodscape: Exploring the role of internet and ICTs. Link [https://novaresearch.unl.pt/files/81080209/aesop-sfp\\_bookofproceedings\\_2019-56-59.pdf](https://novaresearch.unl.pt/files/81080209/aesop-sfp_bookofproceedings_2019-56-59.pdf) (accessed in September 2024)

Delgado, C. (2019). Food Policy Councils. The prospects for Food Policy Councils in Portu-



gal. UA Magazine n. 36. [https://acsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/uam-36\\_food-policy-councils\\_cecilia-delgado.pdf](https://acsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/uam-36_food-policy-councils_cecilia-delgado.pdf) (accessed in September 2024)

Delgado, C (2020) Editor. Alimentar Boas Práticas da Produção ao Consumo Sustentável 2020. Edições E-books CICS.NOVA. Link <https://acsa.org/publicacoes/> (accessed in September 2024)

Website Alimentar Cidades Sustentáveis Associação – ACSA (Feeding Sustainable Cities Not-for-profit Organization) - <https://acsa.org/> (accessed in September 2024)