Context

The worldwide trend of urbanization has witnessed the emergence of megacities in many developing countries, and São Paulo, which today concentrates a population of about 12 million inhabitants, is one of them. This overwhelming pressure challenges cities to ensure a sustainable and accessible food system. National and international food trade plays a vital role in economic growth and influences the local food security scenario. However, if the productive sector is strong enough to meet household needs and increase national GDP through exports, access to food is still a problem for millions of people. The City of São Paulo recognized the need to intervene strategically to reduce socioeconomic inequality and food insecurity in this context of urban and demographic expansion, establishing a municipal food policy based on the participation of civil society and inter-sectoral cooperation.

Overview of the food practice

São Paulo City Hall set up three plans to address food inequalities and urban-rural connection:

1. the 2013-2016 Program presented actions aimed at reducing socio-spatial inequities and food insecurity in the municipal territory;
2. the new Municipal Master Plan recognizes the rural area and the importance of peri-urban agricultural activity; and
3. the first Municipal Plan for Food and Nutrition Security was based on the identification of vulnerable groups, the principles of universal access to food and food sovereignty, and the necessary inter-sectorality of this policy.

Civil society and non-governmental organizations have been actively involved in the process of formulating these plans and policies through thematic councils and other platforms for popular participation.

In 2015, the City Hall established two essential divisions for the implementation of these plans: the Coordination of Food and Nutrition Security (COSAN) and the Coordination of School Feeding (CODAE). These divisions are responsible for developing actions aimed at supplying public markets, guaranteeing access to healthy food, promoting urban and peri-urban agriculture, and ensuring continuous improvement of school feeding and fighting childhood obesity. In addition, the municipality promoted two important conferences: the sixth Municipal Conference of Food and Nutrition Security and the first Municipal Conference of Sustainable Rural Development. Both discussed principles, policies and actions for the City and elected their joint Councils (COMUSAN and CM-DRSSI), with members of civil society and public administration responsible for contributing to the elaboration and monitoring of public policies.

São Paulo was also involved in international actions such as the renewal of the Letter of Intent with the United Nations World Food Programme, the UN-Habitat III Conference, and active participation in the Drafting Committee of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP) and election of the MUFPP Committee. It also won first prize for the “Mayors’ Challenge”, promoted by Bloomberg Philanthropies, for presenting a project based on the local family farming agriculture value chain. These relevant actions were developed jointly with several municipal secretariats and committees with strong civil participation.

Results and lessons learned

The dissemination of good practices is a great engine for innovation. In this sense, the experience of São Paulo has inspired many cities in Brazil and other countries. And, one of the key factors for the relevance of the actions taken by São Paulo was the understanding of its territory as a transversal dimension and, therefore, as an integrating element of sectoral policies. This approach allowed the multiple challenges present in such a large and complex city, with great socio-territorial inequalities, to be addressed in a coordinated way, adherent to the particularities of the different local realities. Thus, it is possible to create synergies between the actions of governments and civil society, increasing the extent of each action and strengthening the continuity of the proposed policies. From different perspectives, this synergy has the following results:

- from the territorial point of view, the incentive to maintain the agricultural activity in the urban fringes is strategic to contain the urban sprawl;
- from the environmental point of view, this action preserves an extensive area of native forest, ensuring local biodiversity and the water resources preservation;
- from the point of view of food security, local production of fresh food and universal access through public school feeding is guaranteed; and
- from the point of view of social inclusion, the dynamization of the local economy can provide new jobs in the most vulnerable regions of the city (peri-urban and rural areas).

Several actions are in progress, including the provision of technical assistance to farmers for agroecological production, the resumption of the social character of municipal markets by offering basic products at reduced prices, educational activities aimed at reducing high obesity rates and civil society engagement in promoting healthier diet. These actions point to real possibilities of an inclusive synergy between actors, where, from the municipal participation instances, civil society played an essential role in the development of food-related municipal policies.