



A new model for the food support programme in Portugal?

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The Portuguese government has decided to stop the provision of meals to the most disadvantaged population through a network of social canteens and to replace it by the provision of uncooked food packages. This is expected to be more cost-efficient and to promote the autonomy of beneficiaries. However, doubts regarding implementation still remain.

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Description

In 2012, the Social Emergency Programme (PES) was created to minimise the negative impacts of the financial crisis on those in the most vulnerable situations, giving rise to a new strategy more focused on emergency assistance. This included an emergency food programme based on a network of social canteens providing meals to the most disadvantaged population. The number of canteens rose sharply from 62 in 2011 to 852 in 2015.

A study from 2015, authored by Cláudia Joaquim (who, in the meantime has become the current secretary of state for social security) criticised the options taken in the programme and suggested that the costs of the network of social canteens were higher than those incurred e.g. with the social integration income (RSI). Simulated for a family of two adults and two children, the amount paid for two meals per day by the State to social organisations would reach €600/month in 2015, i.e. considerably more than the maximum monthly amount of RSI such a family would be entitled to (€374.10). As the RSI is a differential benefit, i.e. the monthly benefit corresponds to the difference between the maximum rate of the RSI and the household's total income, any income would be deducted from that maximum amount.

An evaluation of the programme was published in January 2017. Despite

concluding that most of the beneficiaries are indeed economically deprived according to the definition used by the Social Security services (i.e. a monthly income per capita lower or equal to €201.53), the study highlights implementation frailties such as: i) no concrete evidence that the territorial distribution of the canteens reflects the territorial distribution of the most vulnerable population; ii) indication of oversized offer; iii) absence of solid mechanisms for controlling physical and financial execution of the programme. Thus, the study concluded that the programme should be stopped, which would be consistent with the fact that it was adopted as a temporary programme.

Also in January 2017, the Government announced the end of the programme (except for the elderly and the homeless) and its replacement by a programme focusing on the distribution of uncooked food.

The decision did not generate consensus. The right-wing parties, Social Democrat Party (PSD) and Social Democrat Centre (CDS-PP), considered the decision not to be evidence-based but rather ideological. The Left-Wing Bloc (BE) considered this a good decision as, in their view, the main beneficiaries are in fact the social institutions responsible for providing the meals.

Representatives of the major federations of social organisations supported the decision, considering

that social canteens had played their role as an emergency measure. However, they voiced their concern that, in some cases, the uncooked food supplied may end up being sold.

Outlook & Commentary

The option to prioritise social canteens was taken as part of a policy where emergency assistance was prioritised over wider perspectives of promoting social inclusion. The investment in social canteens coincided with cuts and restrictions imposed on many social protection measures including the RSI. Between March 2012 and March 2017, the number of RSI beneficiaries decreased by 35% and expenditure by about 20%, in nominal terms.

This reflects a particular way of conceiving social inclusion and has obvious consequences in terms of its promotion. It should be borne in mind that the RSI has clearly established criteria which do not depend on discretionary assessment and that it includes both a cash benefit and an insertion programme, based on a contract between the beneficiaries and the programme (whereby both parts agree to develop a set of actions and tasks, necessary for the gradual social, labour and community integration of all household members). These components are obviously less evident in the provision of cooked meals, and even food programmes based on the distribution of supplies still do not involve the promotion of individual and household autonomy.

The conclusions of the evaluation study include a number of recommendations concerning the new food support programme: to promote the autonomy of beneficiaries, to promote access to adequate nutritional support, to define clearly the profile of beneficiaries, to accompany and monitor the physical and financial implementation, to explore ways of preventing stigmatisation, and to make use of financial instruments such as the Fund of European Aid to the most Deprived (FEAD).

The Government has announced that it intends to make use of FEAD and that the transition to the new programme, expected to come into force in mid-2017, will be gradual. These changes are concomitant with measures aimed at extending the coverage and level of social benefits.

At present it is still largely unknown how beneficiaries of the new programme will be selected, but it seems clear that being a beneficiary of the RSI will not be enough to guarantee access to food support. Additionally, doubts have been voiced regarding the feasibility of distributing food packages for one month. This is deemed to bring distribution challenges and storage difficulties for both households and social organisations, especially because the package should include sufficient fish, meat and vegetables for one month. Moreover, even if the change in the programme represents a step towards greater autonomy and accountability of beneficiaries, it does not mean a move away from the field of sheer assistance.

Further reading

GEP-MTSSS (2017), Programa de Emergência Alimentar - Relatório do Grupo de Trabalho (Food Emergency Programme – Report from the Working Group), Lisboa, GEP-MTSSS, available at:
http://www.gep.msess.gov.pt/e_dicoes/outras/pea_ralatoriofinal.pdf

Joaquim, Cláudia (2015), Proteção social, terceiro setor e equipamentos sociais: Que modelo para Portugal (Social protection, third sector and social facilities: which model for Portugal), Cadernos do Observatório, Observatório sobre crises e alternativas, CES-Universidade de Coimbra, available at:
<http://www.ces.uc.pt/observatorios/crisalt/documentos/cadernos/CadernoObserve III fevereiro2015.pdf>

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