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Food choices in the context of a relevant agricultural production municipality: the food environment perspective in Palmeira das Missões-RS

Escolhas alimentares no contexto de um município com relevante produção agrícola: a perspectiva dos ambientes alimentares em Palmeira das Missões-RS

Abstract

Introduction: Food environments can be understood as the context in which individuals access and make their food choices, which may or may not favor healthy and adequate food. **Objective:** To analyze the food choices of urban consumers from the perspective of food environments in Palmeira das Missões, in Rio Grande do Sul. **Methods:** Qualitative approach research, based on semi-structured interviews with consumers living in the urban area of Palmeira das Missões. Data were analyzed through content analysis by thematic categories, from the physical, economic, political and sociocultural dimensions, both related to food environments. **Results and Discussions:** Food choices are intersected with the wide availability and ease of finding more ultra-processed foods than in natura, as well as with the economic conditions, which become limiting of food choices based on the variety and inclusion of fresh and minimal processed foods. The importance of the Bolsa Família Program for the purchase of food was verified, especially for families from lower socioeconomic strata. **Final considerations:** The research findings indicate that food choices based on greater variety and availability of fresh foods are mainly associated with economic conditions and availability of these foods. Therefore, the importance of strengthening public policies for the promotion of adequate and healthy food is highlighted, as well as the relevance of articulating local actions, considering the municipality's agricultural potential.

Keywords: Food environments. Food and Nutrition Security. Qualitative research. Adequate and healthy food.

Resumo

Introdução: Os ambientes alimentares podem ser entendidos como o contexto em que os indivíduos acessam e realizam suas escolhas alimentares, podendo favorecer ou não a alimentação saudável e adequada. **Objetivo:** Analisar as escolhas alimentares de consumidores urbanos na perspectiva de ambientes alimentares em Palmeira das Missões, no Rio Grande do Sul. **Métodos:** Estudo de abordagem qualitativa, que utilizou como técnica de pesquisa entrevista semiestruturada com consumidores residentes na área urbana no município. Os dados foram analisados por meio da análise de conteúdo por categorias temáticas, a partir das dimensões física, econômica, política e sociocultural, as quais compõem os ambientes alimentares. **Resultados e Discussões:** As escolhas alimentares estão interseccionadas com a ampla disponibilidade e facilidade para encontrar mais alimentos ultraprocessados do que *in natura*, bem como com as condições econômicas, que se tornam limitadoras das escolhas

alimentares pautadas na variedade e inclusão de alimentos *in natura* e minimamente processados. Constatou-se a importância do Programa Bolsa Família para a aquisição de alimentos, sobretudo para famílias de menores estratos socioeconômicos. **Considerações finais:** Os dados da pesquisa indicam que escolhas alimentares que incluem maior variedade e disponibilidade de alimentos *in natura* estão associadas principalmente às condições econômicas e à disponibilidade desses alimentos. Por isso, destaca-se a importância do fortalecimento de políticas públicas para a promoção da alimentação adequada e saudável, bem como a relevância da articulação de ações locais, tendo em vista o potencial agrícola do município.

Palavras-chave: Ambientes alimentares. Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional. Pesquisa qualitativa. Alimentação adequada e saudável.

INTRODUCTION

The human right to adequate and healthy food is an important condition for ensuring health and Food and Nutrition Security (FSN).^{1,2} The Food Guide for the Brazilian Population defines that healthy and adequate food must be permanent and regular, taking into account the biological, social and cultural aspects of individuals, in addition to being accessible and adequate in terms of quantity, quality and variety and produced through sustainable farming methods.²

Also, according to the Food Guide, food choices should preferably be focused on fresh and minimally processed food consumption, an aspect reinforced by NOVA, a classification proposed by Monteiro et al.,³ which underlies the Food Guide. According to the document, foods are categorized as fresh or minimally processed, processed culinary ingredients, processed foods and ultra-processed foods.²

With regard to food choices, it is also worth considering that they are characterized by different factors, from conditions inherent to individuals to external aspects of a physical, economic, political, cultural, psychological and social nature.^{2,4} The conditions of physical access to a variety of quality foods or the financial conditions to acquire them have a significant impact on food choices, and may even limit or prevent healthy food consumption.²

In this context, the approach of food environments on food choices stands out. According to the concept proposed by Swinburn, Egger & Raza,⁵ food environments can be analyzed in two dimensions: macro-dimension, which, more broadly, relates to the food system, production models, international agreements and policies related to food production and distribution; and micro-dimension, which is associated with the context of people's lives and is divided into four types: physical, characterized by the availability, types and location of businesses that sell food and by the availability, variety and quality of food; political, characterized by laws and rules surrounding food; economic, which reflects food prices and the population's income; and sociocultural, which demonstrates the perceptions and understandings around food.

Previous studies that analyzed, in Brazil and other countries, the influence of the food environment on food, demonstrate its relationship with food availability, choice and consumption. Among the findings, the studies emphasized differences between neighborhoods, according to the population's income profile. Neighborhoods with a higher income profile have more options for businesses where food can be purchased, more diversity of fresh foods and more nutritional quality of products. On the other hand, neighborhoods with a lower socioeconomic stratum have a series of limitations in terms of access to healthy food, conditions that are manifested by the limited availability of businesses, especially with regard to the sale of fresh food. On the other hand, in lower-income neighborhoods, there is a diversity of small businesses that offer ultra-processed foods and foods without nutritional quality, which can be accessed and purchased easily.⁶⁻⁹

Elements of the constitution of food environments, such as those related to the physical unavailability of businesses that sell healthy foods, can be favorable to inadequate eating patterns that are characterized by ultra-processed food consumption to the detriment of fresh food.^{6,9} In parallel, it is also necessary to highlight that macro-dimensional characteristics of food environments,⁵ as the hegemonic format of the food system, they have negatively influenced the diet, i.e., they have contributed to more globalized, homogeneous diets, of low nutritional quality and with consequent health problems.¹⁰ Currently, many food systems are geared towards the production of agricultural commodities that encourage ultra-processed product production. This production model, based on large scale and few crops, leaves little room for the production of healthier, diverse foods that could be produced locally from, for example, family farming. As a result of such hegemonic model, FNS promotion becomes a challenge.^{2,11}

Given the above, i.e., from the perspective that different dimensions of food environments would influence food choices, this article aims to analyze urban consumers' food choices from the perspective of food environments in Palmeira das Missões, in Rio Grande do Sul. The study in this city, far from large cities, is justified by the intention of looking at food environments in cities with smaller populations. This option is relevant as it differs from the context of most Brazilian studies, dedicated to analyzing food environments in capitals or metropolitan regions, such as Almeida et al.,⁶ Costa et al.⁷ and Duran et al.,⁸ Furthermore, another important characteristic of the municipality concerns the centrality of agriculture, as it is recognized as a major agricultural producer,¹² with extensive areas of monocultures and, therefore, a privileged place to study the influences, even if indirect, of the intersection between the hegemonic food system and the micro-dimensions of the food environment in the population's diet.

METHODS

The research was carried out using a qualitative methodology, understanding that its use in the field of eating can contribute to the understanding of the different dimensions involved in the act of eating. In other words, the use of a qualitative approach in the study of social practices such as food, taking into account not only material, situational and contextual elements, but also symbolic and evaluative, subjective and motivational elements,¹³ allows for broader analyzes of food environments, thus their relationship with food choices.

The research took place in the municipality of Palmeira das Missões, located in Rio Grande do Sul, approximately 372 km away from Porto Alegre, capital of the state. It has about 34,000 inhabitants¹⁴ and its economy is basically associated with agricultural production, especially grain cultivation. According to the Municipal Agricultural Production survey,¹² Palmeira das Missões stands out as one of the municipalities with the highest production of soy in the state, surpassing 300 thousand tons per year. The expressiveness and relevance of this production imply that we assume, in this article, that agricultural production in this municipality plays a central and expressive role in local dynamics. In addition to this, many of the interviewees, when referring to the municipality, consider it a rural municipality, especially because agricultural production is a predominant feature.

For the generation of data in the research field work, which took place from May to July 2019, semi-structured interviews were carried out. This technique allows the interviewer and interviewee to build a dialogue and establish a communication process with the objective of deepening themes, knowing and understanding social phenomena. The semi-structured script, in addition to guiding the interview, allows other questions to be prepared according to the interview progress, making it possible to explore other issues that may emerge.¹⁵

The semi-structured script was composed of guiding questions containing central themes related to the places where food purchases were made and consumer choices. As for businesses, the questions sought to identify types, characterization, physical structure and location, types of food sold, variety, quality and price. Regarding food choices, the script questions aimed to know which foods were purchased and consumed, frequency of acquisition and consumption, favorable aspects and limitations of food choices (price, personal or family preference, convenience in purchase or preparation and availability), amount spent on food and consumer perceptions regarding the food consumed.

Aiming at participants' heterogeneity, the following characteristics were considered: living in different neighborhoods (downtown and periphery); be beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of the *Programa Bolsa Família* (PBF – Family Allowance, Bolsa Família Program); and have different socioeconomic profiles. For this,

the study was based on the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* (IBGE - Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) data,¹⁶ which indicate that the average population's income in the municipality is 2.4 minimum wages. Based on this information, participants with income above and below this average were included. Subsequently, this data was analyzed individually according to family income, by minimum wages. The research comprised 19 participants, living in an urban area in the city of Palmeira das Missões, mostly women, aged between 21 and 60 years old.

Initially, possible participants with whom there was some previous contact or people who could indicate other participants for the research were contacted. After making the first contacts, the snowball technique was applied, in which the first participants indicated others, which could be family, friends or neighbors.¹⁷ Since it is qualitative in nature, the interviews were carried out until the saturation of data on central questions was reached, that is, when the answers started to be repeated, not bringing new information.¹⁸

With the permission of participants, the interviews were recorded and later transcribed in their entirety. Once the transcription was completed, the systematization and analysis of the data produced were carried out. In order to ensure anonymity, participants were identified as "consumer", followed by numbers from 1 to 19. Data were analyzed through content analysis, with thematic categories, unfolding into pre-analysis, material exploration and interpretation of statements.¹⁹

In the first phase, the transcribed texts were read and the material was first organized. In the second, we explored the organized material, its understanding and categorization into four categories, established a priori, according to the micro-dimensions of the concept of food environment proposed by Swinburn, Egger & Raza.⁵ These categories, in turn, gave rise, a posteriori, to the empirical subcategories according to Chart 1. Finally, in the third phase, in light of scientific literature, we sought to build the interpretation and discussion of the research findings

Chart1. Theoretical categories (*a priori*) and empirical subcategories (*a posteriori*)

<i>Theoretical categories</i>	<i>Empirical subcategories</i>
1. Physical dimension of the food environment	- Availability of businesses - Variety of food
2. Economic dimension of the food environment	- Food price - Population's income
3. Political dimension of the food environment	- Public actions on Food and Nutrition Security and their implications
4. Sociocultural dimension of the food environment	- Daily foods and their meaning

Source: The authors (2021).

The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the *Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul* (Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul) (CAAE (*Certificado de Apresentação para Apreciação Ética* - Certificate of Presentation for Ethical Consideration) 07729519.6.0000.5347). Participants agreed to participate in the research by signing the Informed Consent Form (ICF).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The dimensions that involve food choices from the physical, economic, political and sociocultural aspects of the food environment are presented and discussed below.

The physical dimension: availability and variety of food

The presence of supermarkets, markets and mini-markets configures the physical dimension of the food environment in Palmeira das Missões. Thus, accessing such businesses can allow consumers to make food choices according to the availability of food in these locations. According to field research data, it was observed that in Palmeira da Missões there are no supermarkets belonging to large chains, as occurs in larger cities.

Another observation observed was in relation to the fairs of family farming producers, which, despite the municipality's production potential, are little present and do not have the capacity to offer fresh food in a frequent and diverse manner. In the city, a fixed fair was found located in a central neighborhood of the city, which had the participation of nine farmers. In addition to this fair, there are also some spots on the street, where producers sell food, but which are also characterized by little variety and quantity of food.

According to Duran et al.⁸ and Costa et al.,⁷ the presence of businesses can favor the choice of foods such as fruits and vegetables when they are available for access in neighborhoods where consumers live so that the proximity between homes and places of purchase becomes a favorable factor for the purchase of these foods.

However, looking at the context of Palmeira das Missões, businesses' proximity or distance were not an obstacle to food choices, especially of fresh foods, as indicated in the interview excerpt below:

For me, going to the market is easy, it's not difficult and sometimes types of vegetables and vegetables that I don't have during the week, so we look in another [market], not the one we're used to, then we go to the fruit and vegetables market or in another market that has them (Consumer 14).

Based on the participant's speech above, the practice of accessing different businesses is suggested, especially for the purchase of fresh food. But, unlike this, ultra-processed foods, in turn, can be accessed more widely not only in terms of the number of businesses that sell them, but also in terms of their variety or brands, as can be seen below:

Ah, it's easier to find industrialized [food], no doubt, so much so that if you look at a supermarket, bigger or smaller, the natural food part is very small in relation to the rest of the supermarket, it only occupies a small portion of the physical space of the supermarket, it is very small in relation to the industrialized one (Consumer 1).

Absolutely, we do that. It makes people buy more, because of its convenience, it's there and there's a lot more offer [availability and quantity]; if you are going to look at an industrialized product, you have four, five options to buy and if it is a natural product, you have one, two at most (Consumer 2).

As the excerpts from interviews above suggest, wide access to industrialized foods – or, as Monteiro et al.³ and the Food Guide² categorize ultra-processed foods – is an important characteristic of food environments. In this sense, Bridle-Fitzpatrick⁹ explains that the food environment configuration with wide availability of ultra-processed foods can be a more difficult challenge to be overcome than the limited availability of fresh foods. This would be due to the fact that continuous exposure to low-nutrient and high-calorie foods, such as ultra-processed foods, induces the perception of normativity of such products, being often considered a “temptation” that is hard to avoid. Data like this reinforce the importance that food environments are not only more accessible to healthy foods, but also more protective against excessive exposure to these products or situations that favor unhealthy choices.²⁰

It should be noted that the expansion of ultra-processed products, as noted in the interviews, even reaches businesses such as fruit companies, which, in principle, would be businesses destined to the sale of fresh food. Niederle & Wezs Junior²¹ argue that the sale of these foods is very common and even reaches cities far from the most urbanized centers. This movement towards the countryside demonstrates an industrial advance in the production of food and can leverage changes in consumers’ eating habits.

With the same thing in mind, according to Monteiro et al.,¹⁰ factors such as the long shelf life, which allows both distribution over long distances and storage for longer periods, are conditions that favor expansion and the high availability of ultra-processed foods in businesses in different spaces and regions and make food environments favorable for the acquisition and, consequently, for the consumption of these foods, a condition that was observed in Palmeira das Missões.

The economic dimension: food price and population’s income

The economic dimension seems to be an important determinant that interferes in the choices of foods that will or will not be purchased for consumption in Palmeira das Missões, becoming a barrier to eating based on fresh and minimally processed foods.

In this sense, with the objective of guaranteeing some food until they can be bought or replaced again, some low-income participants report that the choice of food is primarily focused on rice and beans. Fresh foods such as fruits and vegetables are purchased and consumed in greater variety by higher-income consumers. For those with lower incomes, fruits and vegetables are not a priority at the time of purchase, so this profile of consumers buys these foods when there is some money left over or also only when the monthly purchase is made, as reported by a consumer interviewee, who explains that the purchase of fruit occurs infrequently:

From time to time, from time to time, it is not always when there is money left over and we buy a little something or another, but it is not always [...] we buy bananas, apples, those things that we like. We also buy these types of fruit, mango and melon, from time to time, it's not always [...] it's a more basic food, rice, beans, meat, a salad, and that's what we like. I like cabbage, lettuce and peppers with tomato, stuff like that, a salad mixed together like this is very good (Consumer 12).

For higher-income consumers, the price does not influence the purchase of food, so much so that some are unable to measure the monthly expenditure on food, possibly because this is not a relevant aspect in relation to choices, as suggested by the following interview excerpts:

The price for me isn't [a concern], the problem is that later you eat a lot of more expensive stuff, but that's ok, this is life [...] but lettuce, tomato, cucumber, broccoli, it is very varied, it depends on what is available for us to buy and consume. In a little while, I go to the market and find a broccoli, then I buy a broccoli, I find a cucumber, then I make a cucumber salad, so it's very relative, but I try to buy a little of everything to have it available at home (Consumer 5).

From these reports, significant differences are observed in relation to food choices caused by higher or lower income of consumers. Although fresh food consumption is an important indicator of healthy eating, encouraged and guided by the Food Guide,² lower-income consumers find it more difficult to make these choices. Canuto, Fanton & Lira,²² when analyzing data on food from national surveys, indicate that people with lower socioeconomic status have fewer possibilities to consume an adequate and healthy diet.

Thus, Gabe & Jaime,²³ when analyzing compliance with the Food Guide recommendations in a sample of the population in the Brazilian territory, they identified that when income decreases, there is also a reduction in food adequacy according to the Guide recommendations, mainly for fruit, vegetable and milk consumption, demonstrating the importance of multidimensional approaches for promoting healthier and more sustainable food and food systems.

Advancing in aspects that demonstrate a more extreme condition of poverty, food choices become even more restricted, as shown in the following excerpt:

I buy a lot of beans and rice because of the children, I buy coarse food, I don't buy any French fries; I see advertisements of French fries on television, so I don't buy things like that. I buy pasta, when I can buy it, I buy corn flour to make a polenta for the children, I buy that little [chicken] tail and carcass, when I can, I buy thighs, which is also cheap (Consumer 18).

As can be seen in the speech above, there are people whose food is restricted, based on traditional beans, rice (when possible) and meat (in this case only the carcass) at low cost. In this case, there is no consumption of fruits and vegetables or milk, for example. According to the participant's report, these foods are only consumed when offered by a neighbor or relative.

This type of food, extremely limited to a few foods, prevents the realization of the human right to healthy and adequate food and the guarantee of FSN, which, in turn, result from regular and permanent access to adequate, healthy, varied and in enough to meet people's needs.^{1,2} Thus, it seems to be essential to structure public policies and programs capable of making food environments more conducive to the access of the entire population to quality food, which would involve making food prices more affordable for the population.²⁴

In Brazil, the *Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos* (PAA - Food Acquisition Program),²⁵ the *Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar* (PNAE - Brazilian National School Feeding Program)²⁶ and the transfer of income through the PBF²⁷ are examples of public policies, as will be discussed below, which aim at FNS for the population and promotion of local development, which should be further encouraged, and it is also important to articulate with local actions.

The political dimension: Food and Nutrition Security programs and policies

When analyzing the political dimension of access to food and its interface with the family's food choices, the research participants spoke of the PBF, with no important citations from other policies such as the PNAE or even local policies. In this sense, there was the invisibility of other policies and, at the same time, the centrality and importance of the PBF for food choices and access in Brazil,^{1,27} as illustrated in the following statement:

[...] I get the children's *Bolsa Família*; when we earn that money, we do some good shopping
[...] I buy beans, which we use a lot, pasta, rice, which I buy a lot, and meat (consumer 19).

The choice for beans was highlighted in the interviews with participants who access the Program. In this regard, Franco et al.,²⁸ when analyzing food consumption of families beneficiary of the PBF in Palmeira das Missões, they found that in at least 75% of families surveyed, the resource was invested in the purchase of basic foods, an aspect that enhances healthier and more adequate food for families.

Through access to the Program, families aim to increase the possibility of improving their food quality with the inclusion of fruits as well, as one of the participants reports: “[...] banana, apple, papaya, I buy them to give them to them [children], I think it's cheap.” It is important to emphasize that the choice of fruits mentioned by the participant tends to have easier access, as they are generally the cheapest, a condition that was indicated by the interviewee. However, in the same way, the choice of low-cost ultra-processed products, such as “[...] “sazon”, tomato sauce, these things we buy, right, they have variety”, also occurs and may be associated with low price, adding to the food environment characteristics, which conditions food choices, especially for lower-income populations.

In an analysis carried out by Cotta & Machado et al.,²⁹ it was observed that the PBF helps to promote FNS, mainly by helping families with greater social vulnerability to access food. However, they also highlighted that there is the purchase of food of poor nutritional quality, which can be a risk factor with regard to the development of non-communicable chronic diseases. That is why it is important, according to the authors, that FNS policies not only integrate different sectors, but also include food and nutrition education strategies.

Access to the PBF's financial resources guarantees some autonomy for families, as it allows beneficiaries to use the money according to their needs, as suggested in the following interview excerpt:

When I get the *Bolsa Família*, I go to the store where I bought their shoes [grandchildren] and I have to do it like this: I have to buy shoes once, then I pay that once [installment] and buy them clothes; then, when I got 300 bucks, I would go to the market and make a good purchase and bring coarse food with any 150 bucks, so I used to do it like that but not now, now I only receive 102 bucks, hence I have to pay 55 bucks from the store. This month I finish, and from the 40 or so bucks that are left I buy rice, if you can buy two kilos of beans, I buy it, you have to buy olive oil too as well as soap to wash clothes (Consumer 18).

Therefore, the program's resources are important for the purchase of items other than those intended for food, such as shoes, clothing and hygiene/cleaning products. These items are also important for family maintenance, but they compete with food, which directly affects the family's FSN condition. That is,

access to food of adequate quality and quantity for health maintenance would need to occur without compromising other needs inherent to human beings.¹ Thus, to guarantee access to healthy and adequate food, it is essential that other social needs and rights, such as access to housing, health, education and basic sanitation, are also met.³⁰

However, even if the resource from the PBF is essential for food, it was observed that for families in more extreme poverty, this resource may be insufficient to guarantee access to adequate and healthy food and other basic needs. This scenario highlights the necessary articulation of local FSN actions that also involve other sectors such as social assistance and the Department of Agriculture, mainly due to the agricultural characteristic of the municipality, which has potential for food production. In this context, the PAA in the simultaneous donation modality²⁵ could be an alternative to encourage local food production and access/consumption, benefiting farmers and families in a situation of food and nutrition insecurity.

The sociocultural dimension: meanings of everyday foods

From the perspective of the constitutive sociocultural dimension of food environments, it was possible to detect phenomena that were manifested in terms used by the interviewees, among which stand out: *coarse food*, *sophisticated food* and *food of the poor*. These expressions, when they appeared in the interviews, were related to minimally processed foods, mainly beans and rice, and were always used by those consumers with lower income, as shown in the following transcripts:

For me, rice, beans, meat, cassava and potatoes are coarse food, etc., and the most sophisticated are packaged foods, sausages, etc., ready-to-eat foods they sell (Consumer 4).

The only thing the poor buy is rice and beans, from time to time they eat different meat [...] this is the food of the poor; the poor always like this food like this (Consumer 12).

Schattschneider, Ruiz & Escobar³¹ discuss some of these perceptions in relation to food in research carried out with the health unit users and the health team members in Porto Alegre-RS. Among users, speeches emerged in which foods such as beans and rice were also symbolically regarded as “the food of the poor”. Regarding the health team, there were understandings that users’ diet was based on rice and beans consumption, as it was the only thing they “know how to cook”, being considered monotonous. In addition, in the perception of professionals, for the diet to become more varied, it would be important to include foods such as yogurt, cheese and tuna.³¹ Understandings like this, when they are part of guidelines that health professionals provide to the population, overwhelm the importance of beans and rice as healthy and culturally important foods, and end up reinforcing stereotypes such as coarse or poor food.

Another aspect identified in the interviews is the appreciation of packaged foods that can be purchased ready-to-eat or prepared dishes, as suggested by one of the excerpts from the interview above. In this sense, Wedig³² points to the overestimation of processed foods so that ultra-processed foods such as sausages, also mentioned by research participants, are seen as a sophisticated food compared to beans and rice, everyday food, a perception that can also transform other foods, often ultra-processed, into sophisticated food, into food desired.

Likewise, Menasche, Alvarez & Collaço³³ argue that food implies representations and imaginaries, it involves choices, symbols and classifications that organize the different views of the world in time and space.

Thus, the authors consider that food is gaining different meanings for different social groups, which may also justify the perception that there is food that is intended for those who have less conditions due to income.

On the other hand, still referring to rice and beans, although cited as coarse food by some consumers, they also appear as being healthy foods, as suggested in the following interview excerpts:

I think beans and rice are healthier; I don't think pasta is that healthy, because it's something you can't eat every day, it's something that heats up and makes you fat, rice, beans and salad are very good to eat, vegetables I think are all healthy (Consumer 19).

Beans, rice, meat, salad, fruit, I consider it healthy (Consumer 9).

From this perspective, the association with the nutritional aspect and the presence of nutrients in food stand out, which would have positive impacts on food, becoming an incentive for consumption. These different perceptions of the same food can also be associated with the information, guidelines that consumers receive and the meaning that the food has in everyday life. Thus, in agreement with Castro & Maciel,⁴ food choices and eating are linked to a cultural system in which food, in addition to being a physiological process, is also a social process.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study aimed to analyze food choices from the perspective of food environments in Palmeira das Missões, a municipality where agricultural grain production is expressive and relevant. For this purpose, the categories that constitute the micro-dimension of food environments were taken for analysis, i.e., the physical, economic, political and sociocultural.

Although the analysis of each of these categories that make up the micro-dimension of food environments has been carried out separately, these different aspects of the food environment have intersections and interact with each other, influencing food choices and access to food. Thus, it should be considered that what is available, consumers' purchasing conditions and their social and cultural values make food choices multidimensional.

In general, it was possible to observe the wide availability and ease of finding ultra-processed food in the city, an aspect that contrasts with the low/little availability of fresh food, as well as the centrality of economic conditions as a limiting factor for adequate, healthy eating, varied and with the inclusion of fresh food. These data deserve to be highlighted as paradoxically the municipality stands out for its agricultural production. However, as this production is mostly focused on monocultures and commodities, it is not able to guarantee FNS in the municipality, contributing to food environments that are more characterized by the presence of ultra-processed foods than fresh food. Moreover, the research also shows that the understanding or perceptions about healthy eating can stimulate the choice of certain foods, reinforcing, in many cases, the option for ultra-processed foods.

It was evident that the PBF, as a public policy aimed at FNS, was an important strategy for access to food by family members; however, in some situations it is insufficient, demonstrating the importance of being articulated with other actions and programs to guarantee intersectoral food and nutrition.

Finally, healthy eating promotion is still a challenge even in small municipalities, including those in which agricultural production is relevant and expressive, such as in the case of Palmeira das Missões. In this sense, the importance of local food policies that encourage diversity in food production is highlighted, with the potential to contribute to healthy and adequate food consumption and to promotion of more sustainable food systems.

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