

# **The Importance of Social Canteens in the Portuguese Emergency Food Program: A Case Study of the Holy Houses of Mercy<sup>1</sup>**

## **A Importância das Cantinas Sociais no Programa de Emergência Alimentar em Portugal – O Estudo de Caso das Misericórdias Portuguesas**

**Maria Cristina Moreira**

*mcristina@eeg.uminho.pt*

Dept Economics. University of Minho, Braga - Portugal

**Ana Fernandes**

*ana.isabel.fernandes@hospital-vilaverde.com*

Master on Social Economics, University of Minho

**Paulo Mourão**

*paulom@eeg.uminho.pt*

Dept Economics. University of Minho, Braga – Portugal

### **Abstract/ Resumo**

The Portuguese social canteens are a social response to fight the extreme poverty and social exclusion in Portugal. The Solidarity Network of Social Canteens was created under the Portuguese Emergency Nutritional Program in 2012 to ensure individuals and/or families in need have access to free meals. This study aims to assess the contribution of the Social Canteens managed by the Portuguese Holy Houses of Mercy in implementing the Emergency Nutritional Program (particularly in a sample composed of the Holy Houses of Mercy in Northern Portugal). Therefore, we developed a detailed (descriptive and content) analysis upon a survey responded by these institutions. Most of the surveyed institutions revealed a significant increase in the number of daily provided meals (an increase of 300 meals per year since 2012). Despite this increase and the discussion of other obtained indicators, the Social Canteens

As cantinas sociais portuguesas constituíram uma resposta social para combater a extrema pobreza e exclusão social em Portugal. A Rede Solidária de Cantinas Sociais foi criada no âmbito do Programa Nutricional de Emergência Português em 2012 para garantir que indivíduos e / ou famílias necessitadas tivessem acesso a refeições gratuitas. Este estudo tem como objetivo avaliar a contribuição das Cantinas Sociais geridas pelas Santas Casas da Misericórdia de Portugal na implementação do Programa Nutricional de Emergência (particularmente numa amostra composta pelas Misericórdias do Norte de Portugal). A maioria das instituições pesquisadas revelou um aumento significativo no número de refeições diárias fornecidas (um aumento de 300 refeições por ano desde 2012). Apesar desse aumento e da discussão de outros indicadores obtidos, as Cantinas Sociais também identificam diversas críti-

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also identify several criticisms in the linkages of the Program, specifically within the following three vectors: governmental support, interconnection among institutions, and the rules of the Program.

*Keywords:* Poverty, Social Exclusion, Social Canteens, Santa Casa da Misericórdia, institutions

*JEL Code:* A13; B55; H55

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The current economic and political conjuncture is producing changes in the organization of Portuguese households' consumption, in particular, food consumption. Since the crisis of 2008, many Portuguese families began facing increased (or new) economic difficulties, which clearly represented a worsening of their living conditions and well-being.

Unemployment, low salaries, low old-age pensions, and cuts in important benefits and social grants are having repercussions further impoverishing those whose only source of income is their work or retirement funds, while poverty and social exclusion are assuming worrying dimensions.

Social canteens stand out in this situation as an answer to a growing need, resulting from the current socio-economic conjuncture. Therefore, considering the maximization of existing resources, a Program of Food Emergency has been created (also called the 'Emergency Nutritional Program'), which consists of a free supply of complete meals (bread, soup, main dish and fruit), seven days a week for household consumption.

In this context, this work aims to determine the importance of the intervention of the Holy Houses of Mercy ("Santas Casas da Misericórdia") in the Emergency Nutritional Program, which was a part of the Solidarity Network of the Social Canteens in Portugal in the years of 2012 and 2013.

The Social Canteens are social structures that have been created to link meal providers with families who need to receive these meals. Having been created as extensions of existing

cas nos termos do Programa, especificamente dentro dos três vetores: apoio governamental, interconexão entre instituições e regras do Programa.

*Palavras-chave:* Pobreza, Exclusão Social, Cantinas Sociais, Programa Nutricional de Emergência, Santa Casa da Misericórdia, instituições

*Código JEL:* A13; B55; H55

social responses (namely, as extensions of the Holy Houses of Mercy), Social Canteens have constituted the major agents in the development of the Emergency Nutritional Program. As a consequence, they are also the main representative members of the Solidarity Network. Therefore, we designed a survey to collect indicators of this platform and the main criticisms of these players to allow correction of these criticisms as the Program evolves.

The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 2 describes the Portuguese Social Canteens, the Solidarity Network of Social Canteens, and the Emergency Nutritional Program. Section 3 describes the methodological steps undertaken in this study to distribute the survey to the social canteens of the Holy Houses of Mercy in Northern Portugal. Section 4 discusses the main results and implications derived from the survey. Finally, Section 5 provides a conclusion.

## 2. PORTUGUESE SOCIAL CANTEENS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY – SOME STATS OF THE SURROUNDING PERIOD AND A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

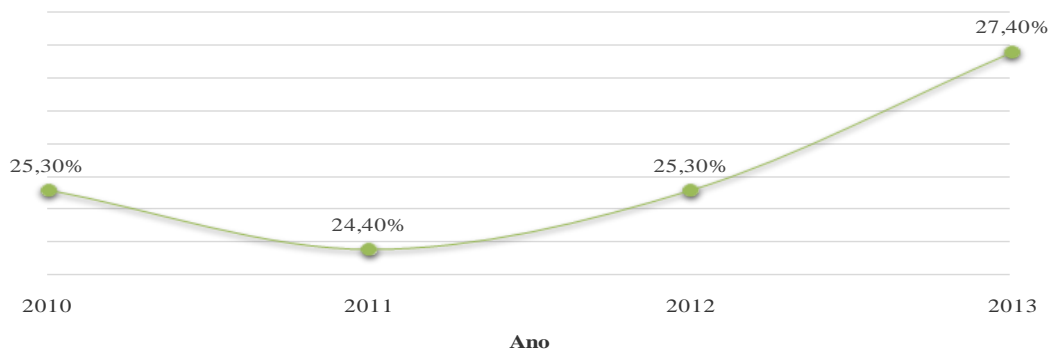
Given the incidence of the Program in the years after 2012, it is important to provide some details about the Portuguese economy in the period before 2012. According to the Report *Income and Poverty*<sup>2</sup> (Carmo, 2010), Portugal has one of the most unequal income distributions in the European Union. The risk of poverty in Portugal continues to be significantly high. The increase in unemployment is notable among the less educated population and with intermediate qualifications. Regionally, the greatest

<sup>2</sup> <http://observatorio-das-desigualdades.cies.iscte.pt/index.jsp?page=indicators&id=215&lang=pt> – accessed April 2015

expression of this phenomenon occurs in the Algarve and Northern Portugal (Carmo, 2010). Alt-

though we verify that there is an improvement in the education levels of the Portuguese population, high rates of school dropouts and a low level of education continue to be registered (Carmo, 2010).

Figure 1 – Population at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Portugal, 2010-2013 (%)



Source: Own elaboration based on INE (2014:13)<sup>3</sup>

The concept of poverty is complex, and some factors may be more important in certain regions than in other regions. Therefore, the definition of poverty used by the United Nations and national institutions, recurs to a large range of situations to characterize poverty, which is defined as follows: *Poverty is a situation of privation, persistent and serious, relative to the satisfaction of one or more basic needs in a given society, standing out among them food, clothing, housing and the respective conditions of use, the essential consumptions, the social support, health and even certain extraordinary consumptions* (Oliveira, 2001:17).

Actually, a good number of the poor people in Portugal work or have family members who are active employees. However, as they tend to have low qualifications, they work in less productive areas where low salaries predominate. Even when these salaries are combined with other sources of income (e.g., family agriculture or other practices of the informal economy), the sum does not reveal itself capable of overcoming poverty. On the contrary, social exclusion often favors the permanence of outdated economic and working structures that are not always productive and are unable to ensure the

quality of life of the population (Capucha, 1998).

Governments, including those of Portugal, have created several programs and tools for fighting poverty across the decades (Costa, 1998). In the next sub-sections, we will discuss the Portuguese Program of Food Emergency and the relevance of a relevant tool within this program – the Social Canteens.

## 2.1. The Program of Food Emergency and the Social Canteens of the Holy Houses of Mercy as Tools against poverty:

### 2.1.1. The Program of Food Emergency and the role of Social Canteens

The Government of Portugal, following the National Constitution, has attempted to have as its main concern the protection of disadvantaged people by promoting social protection, equity, access to health, the reduction of the unemployment and the promotion of employment (Costa, 1998). In this context, national programs that effectively combat fragile social situations, such as the Program of Food

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine\\_destaques&DESTAQUESdest\\_boui=208819520&DESTAQUESmodo=2](http://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine_destaques&DESTAQUESdest_boui=208819520&DESTAQUESmodo=2) – accessed May 2015

Emergency, constitute concrete tools of the public plans in the national territory.

The Program of Food Emergency (“Programa de Emergência Alimentar”, in Portuguese language) was implemented in March 2012, and it was composed of a Solidarity Network of Social Canteens that ensure that people and/or families in economic hardship have access to free daily meals. The number of meals, the duration of the coverage and the nature of the grants are defined according to the specific characteristics of the social equipment in which the meals are served (Union of Portuguese Holy Houses of Mercy, 2012:2).

As stated, Social Canteens have constituted themselves as a primary agent of the Portuguese Program of Food Emergency. However, social canteens are spread worldwide and are not an historical novelty (Long and Nerard, 2014). From schools’ canteens and from those managed by non-profit organizations to the politically-engaged soviet canteens, there are many forms of social canteens which the literature has discussed with a proper set of works.

### ***2.1.2. The Social Canteens of the Holy Houses of Mercy***

The Holy Houses of Mercy characterize themselves as Particular Institutions of Social Solidarity (PISS), which have developed a diversity of social responses for more than 500 years in Portugal. They are involved in several projects of relevance for the promotion of the social and human development of the population and seek adequate answers for the needs of this population. According to the 1<sup>st</sup> article of the aforementioned Decree, Law 119/83, the PISS “are particular institutions of social solidarity created with non-profit purposes by the initiative of particular entities with the purpose of giving organized expression to the duty of moral, solidarity and justice among individuals. They are not ruled by the State or by an Autarchic body (...)”.

By 2011, several social canteens have appeared in Portugal, and many of these are extensions of the existing Holy Houses of Mercy (Mourão and Enes, 2016). The major task of the social canteens has been to fight against poverty and social exclusion.

The establishment of the Social Canteens results from the signature of a Protocol of Collaboration. According to the Union of Portuguese Holy Houses of Mercy (2012), the Protocol of

Collaboration follows the forms recognized by the Solidarity Network of Social Canteens (constituted by the Social Security Institute, I.P. and the representative entities of the social/third sector – the National Confederation of Institutions of Social Action (CNIS), the Union of Portuguese Holy Houses of Mercy, and the Union of Mutualities). The Protocol’s form has thirteen clauses with particular emphasis on the following fundamental aspects:

- The State funds 2.5 euros per meal. There may be an additional grant per meal depending on the income of the recipient family (in accordance with the criteria to be defined by the institution).

- The human resources concerning the Program of Food Emergency may be available in the institution for other social response(s), according to the underlying principle of the creation of the Solidarity Network of the Social Canteens.

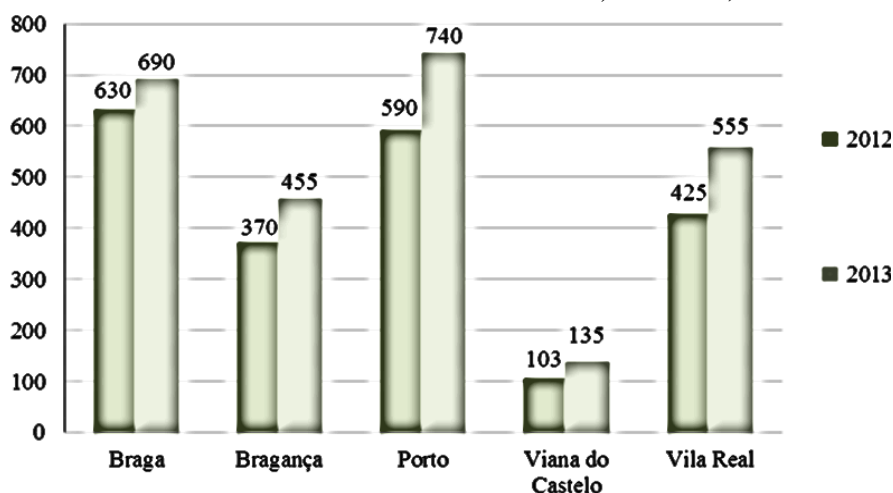
- The identification and selection of people who will benefit from the meal are performed by the institutions. There are some priority targets as follows: elder people, people with lower income, families exposed to (multi-)unemployment or with children, those who have difficulty being accepted by the labor market and people who are already receiving social benefits.

- Situations of recent unemployment or multiple unemployment should also be considered. Families with fixed expenses with children, families/individuals with low salaries or with chronic diseases and fixed housing expenses, and single-parent families or situations of temporary emergency are also potential targets of the Program.

- People cannot benefit from the Program if they benefit from other similar Programs (such as the beneficiaries of the Food Bank, of other Social canteens, or direct distribution of food to the homeless).

Figure 2 (based on the data we collected after the survey) presents that the number of distributed meals in the northern sample of the Portuguese social canteens provided by the Holy Houses of Mercy has significantly increased from the starting year (2012) to the following year (2013). It also reveals significant differences across the different districts (namely, the inner districts of Vila Real and Bragança exhibit numbers that are similar to those of two densest coastal areas, Braga and Porto).

**Figure 2 – Geographical distribution of contracted meals (between the Holy Houses of Mercy of each district and the Institute for Social Assistance, 2012/2013).**



Source: Own calculus based on the survey

### 2.1.3. Comparatives cases of Social Canteens

Other examples of social canteens were the soviet canteens from the 1930s. Long and Nerard (2014) have observed how these canteens were “the place of a healthy diet, but also of a political education and kulturnost (“civilizing process”). Yet with the food crisis and rationing, the canteen became, for Soviet workers, the only location for a regular meal. On the ground, improvisation dominated. Canteens were lacking everything: buildings, refrigerated storage area, cutlery, staff and especially food. Dirty premises, a very poor quality of food, and monotony created discontent among the workers.”

Highlighting some of the works focused on modern times, we find the work of Godoy et al (2017). This article observed that most of the users of Brazilian Social Canteens exhibit anthropometric indicators suggesting Food Insecurity (FI). Men who had a fat percentage classified as “risk of diseases associated with malnutrition” had a 2.34 times greater chance of experiencing severe FI, as did those who had low weight. Godoy et al (2017) also concluded the high prevalence of overweight and body fat in the population at all of the FI levels and for both sexes are an indication of the complexity of the Brazilian scenario regarding the population who eat at Social Canteens.

Finally, Porto et al (2015) observed, in an empirically-motivated article, that “A higher prevalence of outsourcing, and few employees and dieticians were observed [in Social Cante-

ens]. The prevailing foods were baked sausage, cheese, or chicken rolls or pastries.”

### 2.2. Motivation for the survey – which are the major constraints restricting the action of Social Canteens in a specifically impoverished region (the North of Portugal)?

Although the current legislative program intends to renew the role of Social Canteens in Portugal, it has become relevant to assess the functioning of these institutions, even for providing government and societal agents with additional resources for conducting the discussion on the proper renewal of the role of social canteens in the Program for Food Emergency. So, we became interested on analyzing the major role of Social Canteens as promoters of the social economy of the surrounding environments considering the insights of the institutions responsible for the canteens’ development (the general objective of the survey). Given the challenging context of the Northern of Portugal in terms of poverty indicators, we considered structural the focus on this region. MacCallum et al (2009) have provided an enlarged insight about the importance of organizations of the Social Economy in terms of regional development and enhancement of local income and employment. Social Canteens can be firstly discussed within this perspective because of their capacity of providing a local support of needy populations, of enhancing savings for the households and for the State, and of generating a network of

jobs/paid works mostly supplied by resident people (Mourao, 2015).

Derived from this general objective, we have the following five specific objectives, following the five dimensions' model of social programs' evaluation (Rowe and Boise, 1973): to identify the current perceptions of the Program by the evolving partners, mainly by the Social Canteens/Holy Houses of Mercy; to identify the place of consumption of the meals; to assess the adequacy of the supply of the contracted meals regarding the existing demand; to discuss the degree of involvement of the institutions in the development of the Program; and to construct convenient indicators (e.g., number of meals, distribution of these meals in the region) to assess the effectiveness of the Program.

The option for focusing on the Northern area of Portugal has strong motivations. Several reports quoted by Norte 2020 (2014: 357) show that the macroeconomic context of this region is particularly difficult. The unemployment rate is higher than the national mean, especially in the NUTS3 Grande Porto, Tâmega, Douro and Ave. The several indicators of poverty show this region as one area with some of the most challenging values in Portugal. Therefore, understanding the role (but also the difficulties) of the Social Canteens of the Northern of Portugal is relevant for our methodological goals, detailed in next section.

In sum, we have here a phenomenon – the role of Portuguese social canteens in the fight against poverty - characterized by a triangle of dimensions deeply discussed in the previous paragraphs: it is an emerging phenomenon, characterized by a reduced number of studies or of publications focused on the specificity of the problem, and needing an overall perspective and analysis, especially for a given area (the Northern of Portugal).

Following several authors in the literature about Methodology of Scientific Research (Bauer and Gaskell, 2000; Creswell, 2010), the most convenient instrument for analyzing phenomena with a such characterization is a survey. Let us justify this claim.

First, emerging phenomena – like the role of social canteens in the surrounding society – are phenomena which generate complex debates, doubts and expectations in the involved agents, their families and in the remaining community. Authors like Lakatos and Marconi (1986) sug-

gest techniques like experimental research, surveys, phenomenological analyses, or mix methods.

Second, the complexity of the problem but also the emergency of the issue contribute to a significant scarcity of studies focused on certain phenomena. When this happens, authors like Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest the use of instruments like a study of control cases, a content analysis or surveys.

Finally, we wanted to study the northern area of Portugal, due to the severity of the indicators regarding the socio-economic wellbeing but also due to the social significance of the Holy Houses of Mercy in this region. Authors like Freire (1981) suggest a case-study research or surveys for discussing this kind of phenomena.

Therefore, when we try to combine the different instruments suggested for each side of this 'triangle', we observe that surveys are the common suggestion, which led us to design a methodological approach in order to conduct surveys to be responded by all the Holy Houses of Mercy supporting social canteens in the Northern area of Portugal.

We are aware the covered period – 2012-2013 – is a short period. However, we have three justifications for this choice and a derived implication. The first justification concerns that this has been the initial period of the focused Program of Food Emergency in Portugal and therefore – even for policy evaluation – this period was of crucial relevance. Secondly, as we are dependent on the distributed questionnaires, and as there was no other attempt of distribution, we cannot provide a comparison exercise. Thirdly, following authors like Bachelard (1949), the initial periods of a Program of public policies tends to concentrate the most heterogeneous opinions which we consider important for providing a less biased landscape of the range of responses. Although the dated period, we consider it provides important insights for today's design of policies in Portugal against poverty. We are aware that different governments evaluate differently the Program of Food Emergency in Portugal. Despite this evidence, this work is the first article reflecting on the challenges faced by the Social Canteens of this Program and managed by the Portuguese major Non-Profit Institutions – the Holy Houses of Mercy.

Next Section details this design.

### **3. METHODOLOGICAL PLAN OF RESEARCH – A SURVEY OF THE SOCIAL CANTEENS OF THE HOLY HOUSES OF MERCY IN NORTHERN PORTUGAL**

Considering the previous statements, we aimed to accomplish the following goals with this survey: describe the perceptions of the functioning of the Social Canteens; observe the evolution of the number of distributed meals; study the institutional interlinkages, namely the relationships with Social Security; and contribute to the discussion about the evaluation of the Program of Food Emergency. The survey was adjusted to the methodology of the National Confederation of Institutions of Social Action (CNIS), whose authorization for application resulted from contact between one of this project's co-authors with the Chairman of CNIS. From the sample of the institutions listed by CNIS, we expanded the application of the survey to the six districts in the Northern Portugal in the study of the CNIS, referring to the years of 2012 and 2013 (the years of the establishment of the Program that we wanted to analyze).

Considering that the survey was adjusted to the methodology of the CNIS, there was no need to execute a pre-test, and its application ran from November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014, to December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2014, with a total of 18 days available to answer the survey. The form of the questionnaire may be accessed through the web-link <http://repositorium.sdum.uminho.pt/handle/1822/36222>.

It was necessary to determine the objectives before beginning the process. Our questionnaire had five major objectives. The first objective was to collect data about the spatial focus of the Program assumed by the 62 Houses in Northern Portugal. The second objective was to deepen the knowledge about the process of production and distribution of meals to the recipients. The third objective was to characterize the place where the distributed meals were given. The fourth and fifth objectives aimed at analyzing the adequacy of the supply of meals to the related demand to evaluate the level of commitment of each House to alert the (potential and effective) users.

For our survey, a first contact was made by telephone to determine which Holy Houses of Mercy actually had a social canteen and assess their willingness to participate in the study. Then, the survey was sent by letter and e-mail

with an explanatory text of the project objectives (as well with information related to the expected time necessary to answer and the nature of the questions). The responses were received through an electronic platform. A message of confirmation was sent via e-mail. During the research and after the data collection, it was necessary to choose the main procedures for analyzing the collected data. With this in mind, we selected the appropriated analysis functions in SPSS (version 20-c by IBM Corp. SPSS STATISTICS). We chose an application for the statistical processing data and qualitative analysis, i.e., the content analysis of the open answers of the survey questions.

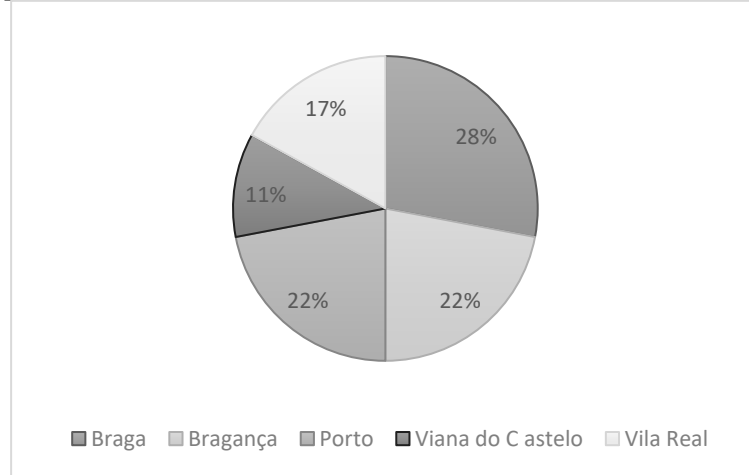
### **4. EMPIRICAL SECTION – RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **4.1 Results**

After collecting the responses to the questionnaire, we analyzed them. We intended to evaluate the contributions to the Program of Food Emergency of several Holy Houses of Mercy in the following districts: Braga, Bragança, Porto, Viana do Castelo and Vila Real. The 62 Houses of these districts composed our initial sample. In Portugal, there are approximately 400 Holy Houses of Mercy, according to Mourao and Enes' (2016) computation. In this work, we only focused on the 62 Holy Houses of Mercy in the north region of Portugal (NUTS II North). This region has 5 administrative districts as follows: Viana do Castelo, Braga, Porto, Vila Real and Bragança. Of these 62 potential members of the Directorate Boards of each Holy House of Mercy respondents, 36 answered the questionnaire. These 36 respondents were distributed in the following way: 10 (from the district of Braga), 8 (from Porto), 8 (from Bragança), 6 (from Vila Real), and 4 (from Viana do Castelo). Figure 3 exhibits the distribution of these 36 responders (who were all members of the Directorate Boards) by Portuguese administrative district.

As Figure 3 shows, 22 of the 36 respondents are in the coastal area of Portugal (Viana do Castelo, Braga, and Porto). The collected data include the following: place of production of the distributed meals, place of consumption of the distributed meals, evolution of the numbers of distributed meals, involvement of the institutions (Social Canteens) in alerting potential users, and finally suggested improvements according to the respondents.

**Figure 3 – Geographical Distribution of the Holy Houses of Mercy that responded to the survey (%).**

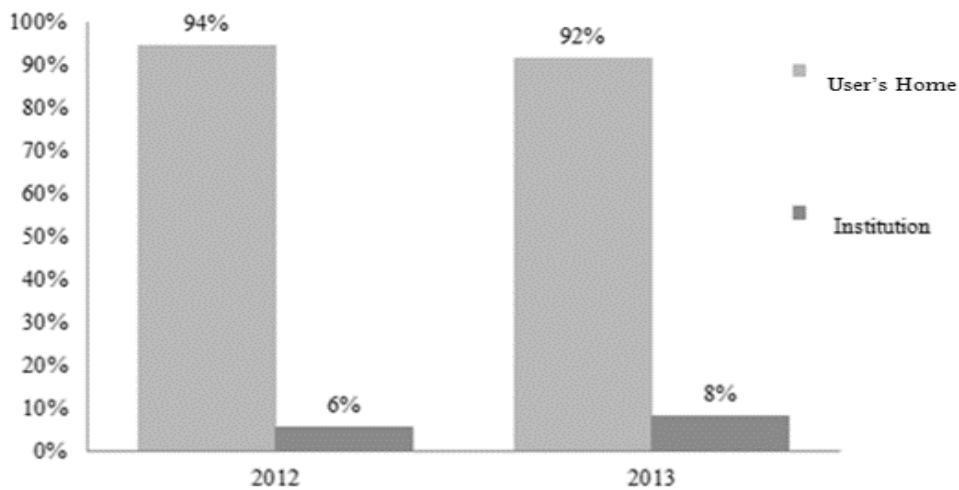


Source: Own calculus

Our survey revealed that most of the surveyed social canteens produce meals at the departments/buildings of the Holy Houses of Mercy (which follows the Cooperation Agreements established between the Institute for Social Assistance/Ministry for Social Security and

each Holy House of Mercy). The only exception to this pattern is the Holy House of Mercy of Braga, which pays a private firm to acquire the meals provided at its Social Canteen.

**Figure 4 exhibits the responses related to the place of consumption of the distributed meals.**



Source: Own calculus based on the survey responses

Almost all of the respondents (93%)<sup>4</sup> shared that the majority of meals are consumed at the recipients' homes (Figure 4). This also follows the terms previewed in the Cooperation Agreements (signed by the Institute for Social Assistance and the various Holy Houses of Mercy). The Cooperation Agreements also make possible the meals' consumption at certain insti-

tutional places/buildings in the cases in which the Holy House of Mercy has an 'Open Answer', i.e., community centers or meeting places; during 2012, the Holy House of Mercy of São Miguel de Refojos (Cabeceiras de Basto) was an example of this.

Between 2012 and 2013, there was an increase of 21.6% in the number of meals daily

<sup>4</sup> The sample error is 10.7% (confidence level, 95%).



distributed per social canteen (from a total of 2118 to 2575). This increase is an additional proof of the enlarged radius of this program's actions because of an increase in the identified number of impoverished people in Portugal during this period. Figure 1 has already highlighted the prominence of this increase in the inner areas of the country (Bragança and Vila Real).

Considering the current financial-economic crisis that the country is facing, some Holy Houses of Mercy consider that the value of 2.5 euros/meal does not support the production cost. These institutions remember the increased costs due to a decrease in the financial support of the Social Security (53% in 2012 and 50% in 2013) that forced the institutions to pay (more) for the additional meals. They have mentioned as an inconvenience the difficult access to some areas, especially rural areas, confirming a relationship between a lack of support and rural places of difficult access/great isolation.

Almost all of the respondents (97%)<sup>5</sup> recognize that their institution is actively involved in alerting potential recipients of the meals, which is an additional proof favoring the strategic importance of the institutions in the Program of Food Emergency.

As further challenges, the respondents warned about the two following issues: a passive interpretation of the social grants by the population that receives them and the absence of notions of self-sustainability or schooling grants to exit precarious contexts characterizing some targeted individuals.

As several authors have warned (Costa, 1998; Carmo, 2010), these issues have a crucial role in the so-called "integration policies" and "employment policies". In this context, several respondents also highlight the serious challenges arising from new groups of impoverished people, most of them without the visibility characterizing the standard targeted groups.

#### 4.2 Discussion of Results and Suggested improvements

For the answers to questions 4, 5 and 6, we opted for content analysis. Given the nature of "questions of open answer", several researchers favor content analysis over other types of methodological analysis. Following Berelson (1952 *cit. in* Carmo and Ferreira, 1998: 251), content analysis is defined as a "research technique

allowing development of an objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the content of the expressions, aiming for a proper interpretation". Obviously, there are certain requirements to be checked to avoid biases in the related interpretation. The first requirement is, after properly preparing the collection of data, to identify the targeted themes. In our case, we focused on the "suggested improvements" that the respondents identified. Then, the researcher has to develop a coding scheme, based on data, theories from the literature and/or empirical studies. The literature criticizing the functioning of establishments like social canteens pointed to the autonomy of the codes linked to the collaborators and volunteers, to the expressions related to the interinstitutional environment and to the regulations of the program. We used these dimensions as codes for our content analysis. Each member of the team of authors of this paper had coded the text as a pre-screening process and as a pre-test procedure. Although authors like Carmo and Ferreira (1998) claim that validity and reliability in content analysis follow the quality of the coding scheme, we also observed Morse et al (2002). These procedures returned an alpha of Cronbach higher than 0.8 (actually, 0.83), which is interpreted as a value suggesting the reliability of our textual data.

We grouped the various suggestions for the Program's improvement into the following three sets: those focused on Social Assistance, those focused on the linkage among institutions and those whose core is centered in the institution and the functioning of the Program.

The respondents provided a considerable variety of answers. These answers can be grouped into the following three sets: improvements regarding the rules/requests coming from the Ministry of Social Security, improvements in the interlinkage among the participating institutions, and improvements related to the functioning of the Program. Let us identify all these suggestions.

Regarding the connection with the Ministry of Social Security, the respondents suggest a higher clarity regarding the functioning of the Program; an enlargement of the number of contracted meals without maximum limits (e.g., without a maximum number of available meals); periodic visits/inspections to monitor the work of the social canteens; a reduction of the period used by the Social Security to transfer

<sup>5</sup> The sample error is 10.0% (confidence level, 95%).

the funds to the Social Canteens; an enlargement of the agreed functions to reply to the emerging social needs; and a higher level of monitoring to better assess the range of the program's effects and the changes in the well-being of the targeted populations.

Regarding the interlinkage among institutions, the respondents suggest a higher connection with the local partners/institutions through a better accompaniment of the families in the training effort, the volunteer work, and the labor market; a higher involvement of the parishes/municipalities in developing new extensions of partnerships; a higher inter-relationship among the partners to better alert potential beneficiaries not yet considered by the Program ("the invisible poor"), and the development of new partnerships, especially in rural areas, to minimize the difficulties of transportation and mobility.

In the functioning of the Program, the respondents of the social canteens of the Holy Houses of Mercy suggest an increase in the number of users of the Program; an increase in the number of contracted/granted meals for the more needy areas/cases; an increase in the support/grant paid per meal; alternative ways to transport the meals to the less mobile populations (especially those in rural and mountain areas); the development of new types of support for families that are able to cook their own meals; and training sessions for those searching for work and covering a range of alternative topics (e.g., home management).

The suggestions provided by the respondents follow other proposals from the literature. Authors like Steinberg and Weisbrod (2017) have suggested the need of a reinforcement of the interinstitutional collaboration as the social needs face increasing challenges. Even if the social needs have differences among the socio-economic regions, increasing challenges in terms of severity (like economic crises or fiscal adjustment programs in areas mainly occupied by aged and retired people) ask for dynamic models of share of information, resources and efforts of the acting institutions. Other authors have also revealed as critical phenomena are excellent opportunities for a renewal of the interinstitutional collaboration (Porto et al, 2015). Finally, authors like Soares et al (2012) also suggest the need for a search of efficiency in the distribution of meals and in the stimulated welfare among the beneficiaries and their families/communities.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER CHALLENGES

This article is one of the first to discuss the role and challenges of Portuguese social canteens since the start of the evolving Program focused on Food Emergency (2012). In this work, we focused on the social canteens managed by some of the oldest Portuguese institutions of the Social Economy – the Holy Houses of Mercy.

We surveyed the social canteens of the Holy Houses of Mercy in Northern Portugal. We aimed to observe the evolution of the distributed meals and the disparity across the region, and we also intended to collect the perceptions of the Holy Houses of Mercy regarding their major challenges. As the supporting Programs evolve toward more mature levels, we hope this discussion will help all those involved in this effort to gain improved results.

Our survey reveals three major conclusions. First, the program had an impressive and rapid enlargement – not only in terms of geographical establishment but also in the number of distributed meals (increases of more than 30% per year). Second, the responders (mostly directors of the Holy Houses of Mercy supervising the social canteens) recognized many possibilities for the Program's improvement. Third, there is an urgent need for a better definition of the roles of the agents and institutions participating in the Program.

Therefore, we posit two main policy implications. The first implication relates to the need for a better interlinkage among the different players fighting poverty and undernutrition in the population. The second implication relates to the existence of a global operation of verification and check-up of all the social canteens in the country, extending the present methodology that was only applied to a sample of these social canteens.

We recognize several opportunities to extend this research. In this sense, for future research, it would be interesting to gauge some issues, namely "Do the meals of social canteens effectively reach those in need, even those more geographically isolated?" We also want to enlarge the surveyed years and contribute to a longitudinal study. For this purpose, we want to survey the institutions in these most recent years and highlight the most significant changes. Therefore, it would be interesting to survey the users/recipients of the distributed meals. We

recognize the potentiality of detailing these users by gender, age, place of birth, where they lived when they resorted to the canteen, whether they had family background, whether they had already been flagged by Social Security, or whether they had some kind of work. This exercise would let us compare their perceptions with the directors' perceptions, which would definitely provide a more integrated perspective of the Program and the functioning of social canteens. We also intend to run multidimensional analyses (such as Multiple Correspondence

Analysis or Cluster Analysis), which may be helpful in order to explore similarities and differences among the surveyed canteens. We also consider as relevant the generalization of the scope of this work to the European Union. However, the different senses of 'canteens' around Europe and the absence of a competent and unified database do not allow this work at this moment. Finally, we want to compare these results with the results achieved by organizations, such as the National Confederation of Social Institutions, as soon as these results become available.

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**APPENDIX A**

**List of the surveyed Holy Houses of Mercy (*Santas Casas da Misericórdia*).**

<b>Region</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>Municipality</b>	<b>Surveyed SCM</b>	
North	Braga	Amares	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Amares	
		Barcelos	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Barcelos	
		Braga	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Braga	
		Fafe	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Fafe	
		Famalicão	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Famalicão	
		Guimarães	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Guimarães	
		Cabeceiras de Basto	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of S. Miguel de Refojos	
		Vila Verde	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Vila Verde	
		Vieira do Minho	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Vieira do Minho	
		Vizela	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Vizela	
	Bragança	Carrezeda de Ansiães	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Carrezeda de Ansiães	
		Freixo de Espada à Cinta	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Freixo de Espada à Cinta	
		Miranda do Douro	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Miranda do Douro	
		Mogadouro	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Mogadouro	
		Moncorvo	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Moncorvo	
		Macedo de Cavaleiros	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Macedo de Cavaleiros	
		Vila Flor	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Vila Flor	
		Vinhais	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Vinhais	
	Porto	Amarante	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Amarante	
		Baião	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Baião	
		Maia	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Maia	
		Marco de Canavezes	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Marco de Canavezes	
		Paços de Ferreira	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Paços de Ferreira	
		Porto	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Porto	
		Póvoa de Varzim	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Póvoa de Varzim	
		Vila Nova de Gaia	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Vila Nova de Gaia	
	Viana do Castelo	Arcos de Valdevez	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Arcos de Valdevez	
		Caminha	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Caminha	
		Melgaço	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Melgaço	
		Ponte de Lima	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Ponte de Lima	
	<b>Region</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>Municipality</b>	<b>Surveyed SCM</b>
	North	Vila Real	Boticas	Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Boticas
Chaves			Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Chaves	
Mondim de Basto			Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Mondim de Basto	
Montalegre			Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Montalegre	
Murça			Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Murça	
Valpaços			Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Valpaços	