

IS ACTIVE AGEING A REALITY FOR LOCAL POLICIES? A DISCUSSION BASED ON THE PORTUGUESE CONTEXT

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Abstract: It is worldwide acknowledged that the rapidly rising share of older people places a challenge to public policies at different scales. International and national guidelines have been underlying both the need to promote a more active ageing and the importance of creating the necessary means for decision makers and other relevant actors to work together (the governance mechanisms) to implement local active ageing policies. How are local governments and other actors conceptualizing active ageing? What are their priorities? What governance mechanisms are used to implement such policies? These are some of the questions that this paper addresses in the context of a southern European country: Portugal. Mixed methods were used to address the issue at stake. First, a study at the national level was developed by applying questionnaires to local stakeholders in order to map local active ageing policies. Second, a case study approach involving interviews in two NUTS III regions was conducted to understand the governance mechanisms. Findings confirm the 'passive organization type' in which European politico-territorial studies tend to place Portugal, as there are gaps in the way policies are formulated, implemented and evaluated, as well as a lack of coordination at various levels.

Keywords: Active ageing, Local policies, Governance, stakeholders, population ageing

1. Introduction

Population in developed countries is rapidly ageing and an increased number of older people is expected to live longer. Amongst the EU member-states, Portugal is already the fourth most aged country, in which approximately 21% of the population is more than 65 yo (EUROSTAT, 2017). Even though this phenomenon results from several positive societal factors, it also creates many individual and collective challenges. Up until the transition to this century, debates and policies on population ageing envisaged mainly the physical and psychological deterioration of the elderly along with the need to provide a range of services capable of coping with such limitations. This perspective was somewhat linked to Cumming and Henry (1961) disengagement theory, which postulates ageing as something inevitable that results in a decreased interaction between the older person and the respective community.

From the 90s onwards, a new representation of older people gradually emerged (Caldas and Thomaz, 2010), mainly influenced by two aspects. Firstly, ageing as a market segment of millions of people. A new image of the elderly – active, consumer, and participant – captured the attention, not only of marketers but also of decision-makers. Secondly, expectations towards public policies increased as older people became more demanding due mainly to the growth of literacy rates. Accordingly, seniors

began to fight for their economic, social and cultural rights in order to be an active voice in decisions that concern them (Naue and Kroll, 2010; ONU, 2002).

At a public policy level, a more efficient answer to the ageing phenomenon relies on a multi-scale intervention, i.e, involving various public entities at local, regional and central levels – whole of government approach – in close collaboration with other stakeholders – whole of society approach. The challenges posed by this cooperation should be taken into account by policy makers in the elaboration and implementation of policies to promote active ageing.

The World Health Organization (WHO), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Commission (EC) concomitantly refer to active ageing as a process not only of individual responsibility but also of collective responsibility, implying productive activities, be they economic or social, without putting aside the physical and mental well-being (José and Teixeira, 2014).

Accordingly, national and EU policies seek to overcome the social imbalances resulting from an ageing society, such as the pension system, social security, and restrictive measures harmful to the interests of retired citizens (Pereira, 2011). However, if we take into account that each place has a specific cultural pattern which influences its political culture and social practices, one may argue for the nuclear importance of the "local level" in the process of designing a plurality of policies in society. Being a crucial element in the central government/society dialogue (Ruivo, 1990), local government and local stakeholders must thus act as key players in fostering active ageing. According to the Age Platform Europe (2011), they are in the best position to meet the needs and challenges facing the older population, as they are at the forefront of capitalising on opportunities for active ageing. These local or even regional actors are linked to education, health, sports, transportation or even employment policies that will emphasize good active ageing practices.

The design and implementation of policies aimed at improving the living conditions of the population depends on the involvement of several actors, be they public or private, such as local governments, non-profit organizations, among others (Bárrios and Fernandes, 2014). From the few studies focused on this subject, it is worth mention the works published by Barbosa (2015), which compares Portugal and Sweden with regard to local initiatives focusing on population ageing, and Bárrios (2017), which seeks to identify and analyse policies and political support for ageing, taking into account the characteristics and needs of the older population. It is possible to conclude from these studies that local governments, endowed with skills and resources, play a key role in improving the conditions of older people, since there is, in fact, a role of greater proximity to the citizens, accompanied by a greater capacity to mobilise the remaining local stakeholders.

This paper attempts to contribute to the research developed with respect to local public policies supporting active ageing in the Portuguese context, seeking to answer the following questions: how do local governments and the other local stakeholders conceptualise active ageing? What are the priorities underpinning the promotion of active ageing (e.g., urban design, healthy lifestyles, social and financial support)? How are policies of active ageing are designed and implemented and through which governance mechanisms?

2. Methods

In order to answer to the questions above listed, a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods and analyses, was applied.

In a first phase, so as to obtain a broad picture of the local policies implemented in Portugal, a self-administered questionnaire was created and sent via an online platform to several key actors working in the following institutions: Local Government (LG); the charity institution of Santa Casa da Misericórdia (SCM); Community Care Units (CCU) and Senior Universities (SU). These actors and institutions were chosen due to their nuclear role in capitalizing opportunities for active ageing, thus being perceived as proxies of the most salient dimensions- social, health and educational- involved in this process.

The goals of this phase were twofold: to understand if the actors were aware of different concepts and notions related to active ageing and to map the ongoing and future initiatives developed within this context, from a multi-level perspective.

The applied questionnaire comprised three sections. In the first one, participants had to identify key concepts of active ageing and respective source of knowledge. In the second one, participants had to rate in a Likert scale (1- highest priority to 5- lowest priority) the degree of priority concerning a set of strategies that the Local Council should adopt to face the challenges posed by an ageing population. In the third section, participants had to identify implemented policies, cooperating entities and, in those cases, the main outcomes.

482 answers were collected, among which 162 were complete and 320 incomplete. In the end, and after a detailed analysis, 153 answers were included: Local Government (n= 96); Community Care Units (n=24); Santa Casa da Misericórdia (n=23) Senior Universities (n= 10), which geographical distribution is presented in Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4.



Figure 1 – Response distribution- Local Government

Figure 2 – Response distribution- Santa Casa da Misericórdia



Figure 3 – Response distribution- Community Care Units Figure 4 – Response distribution- Senior Universities

After the questionnaires’ analysis, key actors from Aveiro and Coimbra- the 2 more representative regions in the previous phase- were contacted to explore some additional information through semi-structured interviews. More specifically, we intended to further explore two aspects: (i) the process of elaboration and implementation of active ageing-related policies at a local level and (ii) the ways in which the actors work and interact with local, regional and national entities in this process.

Eight interviews were conducted following a script divided in three sections. The first section focused mainly on the challenges that active ageing may pose to the local power and local policy definition and implementation. In the second part, the goal was to analyse the extent of the horizontal cooperation between the several entities involved, exploring if and how the policies were being coordinated with a wider network of institutions that also promoted active ageing. Finally, and drawing on a multilevel perspective, we intended to explore the inter-connection between policies defined at a local level and other government levels, namely regional, central and European. From the eight interviews conducted, five were with LG actors and three with actors from SCM, one CCU and one SU.

A descriptive analysis with a software (SPSS) was conducted on the data collected through questionnaire whereas the interviews were transcribed and subjected to a content analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

(i) Concepts and perspectives by key-actors

The analysis of the answers to the first section of the questionnaire, where participants had to identify key concepts of active ageing and respective source of knowledge, shows that “active ageing” and “healthy ageing” were the most familiar concepts for more than 90% of the participants. On the other hand, 50% participants from CCU and 43% from SCM did not know the concept “productive ageing”. One could attribute these results to the fact that, in both entities, almost 50% of the participants were

not in high rank coordination positions, hence not being responsible for the organization. Still, an analysis of the answers of the participants which were the heads of SCM and CCU shows that only half were aware of the concept.

A more adequate interpretation is that the actors of these two particular entities of services provision related to Health and Charity deal mostly with older people in more vulnerable positions, thus not recognizing immediately their potential as active members of society. The opposite is true for the actors working at LG and SU, whose familiarity with the concept, may be due to the fact that they are closer to active older people, thus having a more positive view on their potential contribution to society. In what regards the concepts of “healthy cities” and “aged-friendly cities”, the LG actors are the ones showing a higher degree of familiarity with the concept, probably due to their role in elaborating and putting these concepts into practices and policies.

The link between knowledge of a specific concept and proximity to the entities’ reality and actors’ position within the institution is also corroborated by the analysis of the knowledge sources. In what concerns the concept of “productive ageing”, results indicate an association between knowledge of the concept and working in entities that value and envision related practices. As such, SU actors indicate that they were informed of its existence in classes, which is coherent with the entire mission of the entity whereas LG actors refer that the information on the concepts and related actions are transmitted via institution or via European guidelines.

The relatively low percentage of actors from SCM and CCU learned about this concept by themselves, with only 10 % indicating that it was via institution. As for SCM, only 10 % were informed of the concept of “productive ageing” via institution.

In what refers to the perspectives more valued by these entities, it is important to highlight that, for LG actors, the matters concerning public spaces and urban design barriers are perceived as of low priority. This may mean that there are already measures being implemented to tackle this issue and/ or that there is a more urgent concern towards the promotion of individual practices related to healthier lifestyles and leisure activities. On the other hand, there is a major concern from SCM actors regarding public space design. This may be explained by the fact that this entity deals with more dependent older people, which may also influence the high percentage of SCM actors that devalue the contribution of older people to decision-making processes.

For the CCU actors, who also contact with a population with a higher level of dependence, the less valued perspective is also the one concerning the contribution of older people to decision-making processes as opposed to the high priority attributed to the implementation of a good transport system that may prevent social isolation.

Differently, actors from SU, in line with the ones from LG, value less the Public Space design and more the involvement of older people in decision-making processes. These choices reflect, respectively, the type of population that they are used to deal with who tends to be more active on physical and cognitive aspects.

(ii) Implemented initiatives

After mapping the knowledge of concepts and the perspectives held by key actors, the implemented initiatives were identified and analysed in order to have a representation of what is currently undergoing in the Portuguese territory. As shown in Figure 5 below, the majority of the initiatives are elaborated and implemented by LG, unsurprisingly given the specificities of the Portuguese culture and political tradition. Social action is the field with more initiatives, being these related to policies which promote support and benefits, particularly financial ones. Health- related initiatives appear in second place, referring to events that promote health education and sports.

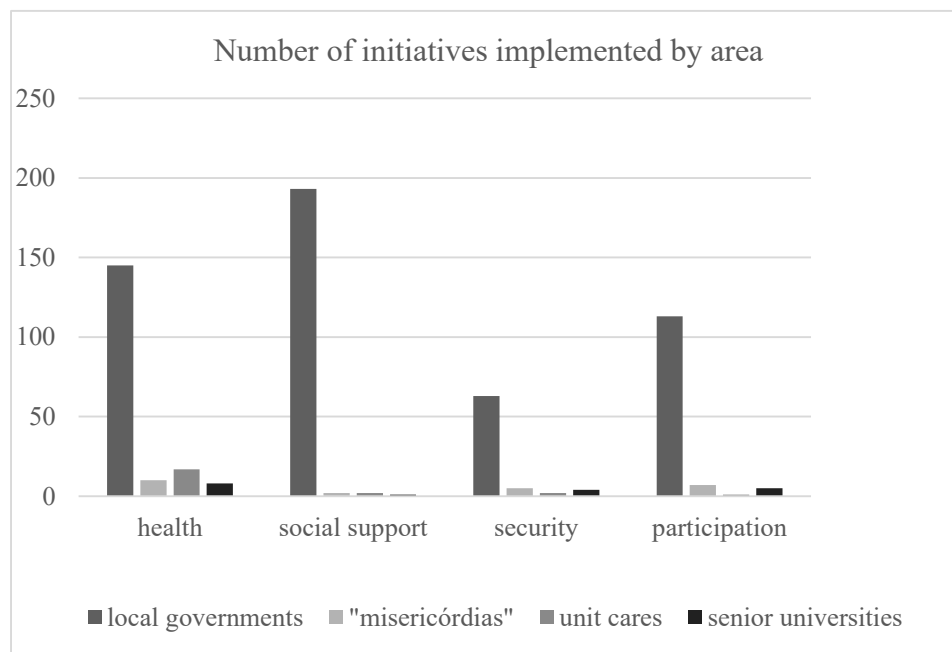


Figure 5 – Absolute Frequencies of implemented initiatives by area

On a related note, it is worth mentioning that, at the local level, many initiatives and policies are elaborated and implemented through a system of networks, as is evidenced by the number of local partnerships. LG (cfr. Figure 6) is the most prolific entity in establishing partnerships, namely through “Rede Social”, which is defined as “a planning and execution device of participatory public policies and an instrument that promotes synergies and a coherent action towards an active social state” (IESE, 2012:7).

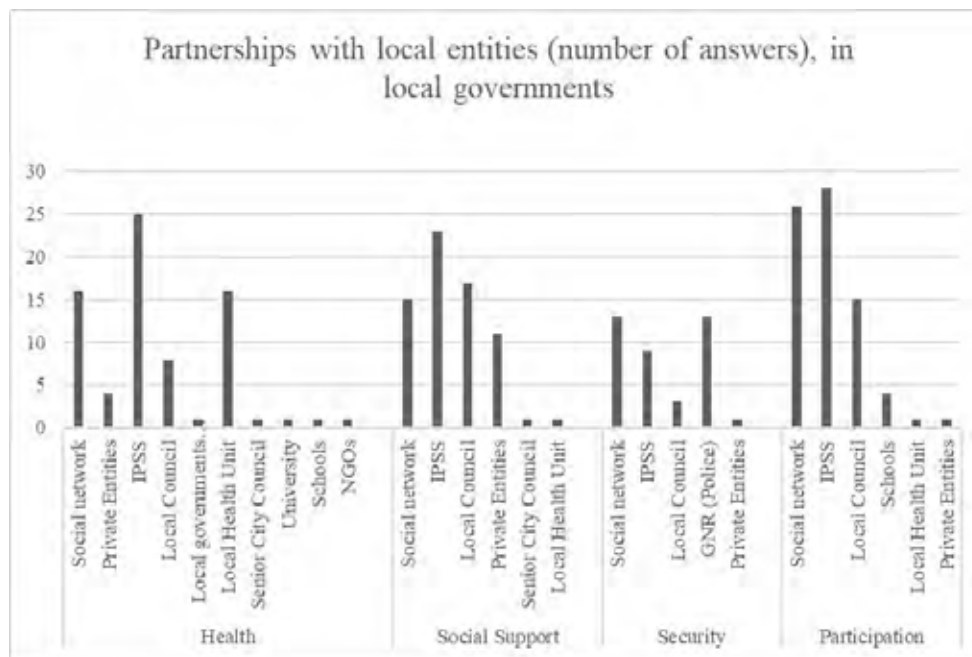


Figure 6 – Absolute Frequencies of Partnerships with local actors and LG

Even though the added value of these networks, their large majority are still at a local level, thus lacking a coordination with national entities, and, what is more, a systematic assessment of the results.

The aspects outlined so far on the process of policy-making and underlying governance mechanisms were corroborated by the data collected through the interviews. A fundamental aspect relates to the perceived positive role played by networks established at a local level, such as “Rede Social” and CLAS (platform of debate, at local level, focused on the participation, representation and collaboration between public organisations and private social initiatives”(Law- Decree no.115/2006, 2006). The work developed by these two networks is viewed by our interviews as crucial for promoting active ageing practices, particularly due to their ability in motivating local entities to work together for a joint cause. Intermunicipal Communities (IC) and Supra- Council Platforms(SCP), the latter partaking “ Rede Social” are also viewed in a positive way, given their role in optimizing the planning and management of financial and social resources.

However, it should be noticed that most of the interviews were conducted in Aveiro IC which has addressed, in recent years, the optimization of several aspects concerning the process of active ageing. Accordingly, in what refers to the formulation and implementation of policies, LG actors from Aveiro Region are the ones most concerned with consulting the population in order to identify existing problems and define measures that can tackle citizens’ specific needs. This is not the case for other regions in Portugal, where still prevails a weak culture of formulating and implementing local policies for active ageing.

On a related note, one of the most salient problems identified in our study is the lack of an efficient multi-level cooperation. This is particularly true for the relation between local government and intermediary and central instances, especially in what refers to the clear definition of roles and inherent responsibilities. Without specific guidelines on the matter of ageing provided from the central power, there is a disparity between regions, given that most of the initiatives rely on local contextual features, such as demographic and financial aspects.

According to Matos (2013), improvement of multi-level cooperation may result from connecting CLAS and PSC (NUT III), at a council level, to Social Security Institute, at a national level, that, in turn, could respond directly to the central power. This model enables the formal conditions to articulate different levels of power, either between actors as well as policies and instruments.

Only the interviewees from Aveiro Region mention this cooperation, agreeing on the relevant work conducted by the CLAS and PSC. However, the connection between PSC and central government is still perceived as inefficient.

Another important result of the present study refers to the perception held by LG actors on two main gaps: the lack of financial support to develop more initiatives and the insufficient legislation concerning what they can and should do within the context of policy and practices development. Although the interviewees from Aveiro region show a higher level of knowledge of national and European policies on ageing, especially of the ones that were already in course, overall, those are not widely known. What is more, it appears that the organizational structure of LG entities is lacking venues and means to inform their employees on European guidelines and to apply systematically to communitarian initiatives and funding.

4. Conclusions

The definition and implementation of active ageing-related policies requires a broader view on the multidimensional nature of the ageing process. True, political agents are increasingly thinking and debating the pervasive issues of population ageing. However, as argued by Walker and Maltby (2012), even though "active ageing" is widely promoted by the EC, this does not automatically translate into devising and designing policies to be implemented. The results of our study shed some light on some of the strengths and shortcomings of this process as it is perceived by the key actors who partake it.

In what concerns the design of policies and the development of initiatives, one of the most salient issue is the lack of a clear cooperation between levels of power, which is viewed as fundamental to approach some of the challenges posed by an ageing population. This is also a key-element put forth by Ferrão (2015), who posits the importance of multilevel governance to public policy design and implementation while defending that it can only be efficient as much as the needs, priorities and capacities of private and public actors are taken into account.

This consideration is aligned with the view on the importance of consulting the local population on a regular basis so as to have an informed insight into specific concerns, needs and limitations. Another salient theme of our data was the role of networking for more efficient governance mechanisms. This process is perceived as paramount to design and implement active ageing policies and initiatives; as ageing is a concept that encompasses many areas, it is an added value to devise joint (network) measures. Local governance mechanisms play herein a crucial role by enabling a network of partnerships between local entities, ranging from third sector institutions, public and private providers, academic institutions and civil society. On this regard, "Rede Social" is a strong lever to aggregate and get the local agents in constant cooperation. However, the absence of a multilevel view (encompassing the central level) limit the scope of the initiatives, which are mainly focused on the promotion of healthy lifestyles and leisure and occupation activities, as there are no guidelines from the central government that may serve as a guide to local government. As for the intermediate

structures, namely at the level of the IC, the interviewees identified the need for these structures to consolidate their role as places for debate and sharing, for policy implementation, for clarification and, above all, for monitoring what is at stake.

The results obtained with this study allowed a deeper understanding about what is being outlined at the local level regarding active ageing whilst identifying some of the inherent mechanisms of the decision-making policies process. Firstly, it was possible to identify the areas in which the entities were most involved, namely the promotion of healthy lifestyles and occupational and leisure initiatives, with a very strong commitment on the part of local governments in the area of social security and financial benefits. Secondly, it showed the prominence of a culture of decision-making in network, based mostly in the Rede Social. Finally, it corroborated some concerns express by research on governance within the Portuguese context, specifically regarding the lack of guidance from the central administration on these matters, as well as the low interconnection between the different governance levels. In this context, it was possible to observe that an intermediate level of governance may be the key to these issues, with the CIM and the CPS holding the potential to foster debate and common practices among the various municipalities in a region.

On a final note, it is important to mention two main limitations of this study, that may be tackled in further research. The first one refers to the sample size, which was relatively small, hence not allowing a generalization of the conclusions. The other one relates to the importance to combine our approach with (i) a mapping of these policies in the Portuguese territory, in order to understand the different geographical contexts (coastal / inland or rural / urban) and (ii) the extension of the study to other regions of the Portuguese territory so as to explore if these findings are context-dependent or if they reflect a more national-based reality. Finally, it would also be of great value to compare the differences and similarities between the Portuguese context and other European countries, especially in what concerns the degree up to different countries align their policies with European guidelines or lack thereof.

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