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Integrated risk governance of a termite urban pest, challenges in risk communication: mediating conflicts in a public decision process

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Nowadays termites are among the urban pests that cause more damage worldwide (Borges & Myles, 2007). Its aggressiveness is internationally recognized by invisibly consuming houses' infra-structures, furniture, books, clothes, statuary and other wood artefacts. The species is well established in the United States, Brazil and in the Portuguese Atlantic islands of the Azores where it has had greater impact. The occurrence of the drywood termite, *Cryptotermes brevis*, was only officially detected for the first time in 2002, at a moment when the pest had already infested large areas of the three major cities of the archipelago: Angra do Heroísmo, Ponta Delgada and Horta

In the present time, the drywood termite is considered the most dangerous urban pest in the Azores and its economical and patrimonial impacts have raised considerable concern from citizens and the scientific community (Borges & Myles, 2007). Also alarming is the first record of *Cryptotermes brevis* in one building in Lisbon, since it is the first time that this serious invasive pest was detected in the Portuguese mainland (Nunes, 2010). Being Europe's front entrance to the pest as there are no policy control measures concerning customs doorway.

It is currently a well established pest in the region generating the alarm that the pest will spread to the entire archipelago and beyond its frontiers. Deserving special attention the main urban city centers due to their traditional architectural housing characteristics and design - infrastructures mainly built with wood - whose distinctive features have been recognized by Unesco (Angra do Heroísmo was classified World heritage in 1983) but that now threaten the safety of its inhabitants. Especially when combined with the region's volcanic and seismic regular activity (with crisis ranging from moderate to high intensity) increasing the seriousness potential of its impacts. In 2002, when the problem was first addressed, by concerned citizens, in the public sphere, the primary concern of the government was to legitimize its action through the funding of research in the risk appraisal domain. These studies focused on risk assessment, enabled to biologically identify the hazard in question producing scientific knowledge in termite ecology, risk mitigation strategies and the regions' exposure and environmental vulnerability to the exotic species.

This investment did not have any impact in the control of the pest revealing a complete lack of integrated pest management strategy as it was not followed by mitigation, control and prevention measures as proposed by the researchers. Being the citizens completely left alone with “their problem” as it was thought, by the local government, that this was a private issue that each and every citizen should deal with “it” when “it knocked on their doors”. Despite all the alarm caused by the ever growing cases of infested houses it was long before the government actually understood the need to create a taskforce (Resolução nº131/2004 de 16 de Setembro), composed by representatives of different departments, in order to plan a pest management program and trace a set of recommendations to the various stakeholders involved, concerning (1) information about the sources of risk and the strategies to manage it, (2) technical advice and information to the population under risk, (3) strategies to mitigate and control the source of risk, and (4) law measures on prevention, and control of infested waste (Borges & Myles, 2007). Even in so doing it was only in 2005 that the Housing Secretary published an official document (Dec. Leg. Reg. n.º 20/2005/A de 22 de Julho de 2005) defining the first legal framework. This Legislative Decree reported only on the need to give financial support to the ones in need of substituting their homes damaged infrastructures by rehabilitation and/or reconstruction works, mainly trying to respond to the social pressures that spotlighted the political agenda and not to actually face the problem. This housing policy was followed one year later, by another one from the Environmental Secretary (Portaria n.º 32/2006 de 20 de Abril) to regulate the destruction of waste produced by reconstruction works, but those were to be applied only to the waste originated by construction works object of public financial support.

Another research project, from a social science perspective was then object of funding to study the socio-cultural determinants of the problem - risk perceptions, tolerability & acceptability assessment traced the risk profile as

Cassandra (Klinke & Renn, 2001) characterized by a high probability of exposure, great damages felt as intolerable (by threatening the safety associated to 'our own home') but with a long delay between causal stimulus and negative effect, due to an invisible process of action. To cope with this kind of risk the authors propose the adoption of a discursive management strategy with "an emphasis on reaching political consensus or agreement, the importance of procedure and transparency, the establishment of trust-generating institutions, and investment in risk communication, the involvement of stakeholders, including industry and governmental organizations, and public participation". But more significantly this study enabled to trace this type of problem as a risk with 'induced complexity' (Reen, 2005) in need of an epistemological discourse where trust is instrumental to improve the capacity of facing this kind of risk in question by building strong reliable organizations and institutions putting an end to the existing give-and-take game where one stakeholder accuses the other of alienation and of being responsible for the worsening of the problem.

A risk communication framework was then adopted to promote dialogue between all the parts involved in order to trigger communicational mechanisms to foster the mediation of the different interests, deconstruct resistances and regain mutual trust in order to build the atmosphere of cooperation necessary to face this infestation. A regional campaign embracing different levels of public involvement was then planned to counterpart this "back office" enterprise of mediating the different stakeholder's agendas. Different Intervention strategies and communication devices were created and are being tested, some more unidirectional (Outdoors, Comics, Radio spots) than others (Direct mail of magnets and traps to the citizens install in their houses, T-parades, T-squads, T-8 Summit meetings) comprising different levels of participation, but all with the same strategic goals: consolidate social consciousness of the pest, involve all the actors, share responsibilities by compromising in risk mitigation actions, and cooperate in the monitoring and control of the pest in collaboration with the citizens' the local parish

Now finally the first true pest regulation law (Decreto Legislativo Regional n.º 22/2010/A) was recently published and has not yet been critically analysed. What is intended with this paper is to critically analyse the political context of the public policies that have been created by the regional government, since the publication of its first official document in 2005 to the latest in 2010, comparing the different goals, strategies, values, concepts and definitions of the problem over time, in a diachronic perspective but also in a synchronic point of view when comparing with the ones created and in current use in other political and social contexts, in countries where the pest has also been detected (Brazil and the USA). In order to unveil the political intensions beneath the legal discourse through which each and every country defines and accomplish its state definition of this environmental and public health problem.

Qualitative research methods through descriptive-interpretative document examination will be applied by creating à posteriori an analytical grid to unveil the main themes and correspondent indicators that cross the legal normative, in order to understand the politico-ideological guidelines that officially frame the problem possibly in conflict with the other stakeholders' agendas. This legal speech examination will also be confronted with data collected through fieldwork that took place among the employees in four city councils in order to compare the actual implementation that took and is taking place in the institutions involved.

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