Proposal for communication at the EEG Research Day - 2026

Master in Public Administration

Between Policies and Practices: Migrant Youth and the Escolhas Programme in Fundão

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With over 100 local projects funded across Portugal, the Escolhas Programme is a public policy aimed at social inclusion for socioeconomically vulnerable youth, particularly those with a migrant background. Interest in the programme stems from the fact that it is one of the longest-running public policies in this area in Portugal, and 2026 marks its 25th anniversary. This dissertation will then examine the programme's resilience through a case study of a specific local project (Projeto Matriz) in Fundão, in Portugal's central region.

While it is widely accepted that this public policy has been successful in many respects, with various external evaluation reports supporting this claim throughout its years of operation, this dissertation will examine Fundão's political-institutional "ecosystem" and analyse this specific public policy present in the territory (the Escolhas Programme).

This municipality's project was chosen because of the numerous public policies the city has developed over the last few years to encourage people to settle in the region, which is one of the least populated and fastest-aging areas in Portugal. In this context, the Escolhas Programme can be considered one of the elements that make up this 'welcoming' ecosystem of public policies. This is particularly pertinent given that the municipality is a member of the consortium that supports Projeto Matriz in the city.

The objective is to gain a better understanding of the interaction between this "political ecosystem" and the operational design of the Escolhas Programme, and how this interaction activates specific mechanisms that contribute to the project's sustainability and adaptability, particularly in low-density territories such as Fundão.

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative approach, grounded in a case study strategy and informed by a realist evaluation framework developed by the authors Ray Pawson and Nicholas Tilley in their book Realistic Evaluation (1997).

In this regard, the ICAMO configuration (Intervention–Context–Actors–Mechanisms–Outcomes) was selected as the primary analytical framework for this dissertation. This approach builds on the initial work of Pawson and Tilley and is used to identify causal configurations through which public policy generates outcomes in specific contexts. Based on this approach, the main research question guiding this dissertation is: **how does the interaction between the local political-institutional context of Fundão and the operational design of the Escolhas Programme activate specific mechanisms that contribute to the sustainability of the Matriz Project as a policy for including young migrants?**

In order to answer these questions, data collection techniques include documentary analysis of internal and external evaluation reports of the Escolhas Programme, as well as semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, namely members of the Matriz Project's technical team, the former National Coordinator of the Escolhas Programme, the former Mayor (Presidente da Câmara) of Fundão, and a young project participant.

It is important to note that, at the time of this abstract, the dissertation is still in progress, especially regarding data analysis (which will be conducted primarily through thematic and content analysis, supported by NVivo software).

Expected findings may relate to something many authors in the field have long advanced, but that remains relatively underexplored in the Portuguese context: the decisive role of the local context in activating/facilitating mechanisms such as inter-institutional cooperation within the realm of "integration" policies. This term - "integration" - will be critically analysed throughout the dissertation to assess whether it can be usefully operationalised in the context of public policies. Additionally, the programme's ability to adapt to territorial specifics will also be assessed to understand the importance of context.

This dissertation hypothesis suggests that articulating multilevel governance with locally embedded initiatives enhances the effectiveness and longevity of what can be regarded as inclusion/integration policies. Examples such as Fundão suggest that this type of policy contributes not only to the integration of migrant youth but also to broader objectives of social cohesion and territorial development in inland regions.