

# WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis  
A collective work by CES



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Centro de Estudos Sociais  
Universidade de Coimbra



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# ACCESS TO WATER

Paula Duarte Lopes

The 2010 recognition, by the United Nations, of the human right to water confirmed the right of every person to have access to a sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable quantity of water for basic needs, including hygiene and food. In countries where physical access to water is practically 100 percent guaranteed, as in most so-called developed countries, which include Portugal, the main issue is to ensure access to drinking water at affordable prices. In many countries, as is the case with Portugal, water service charges can result in disconnecting the water supply for lack of payment. There are several instruments to prevent this measure, from subsidies to special payment plans to social security support and social tariffs, among others. However, none of these instruments is automatic, and in emergency situations the system is not flexible enough to timely respond to cases of lack of financial capacity to pay the water bill. In the current pandemic context, several municipalities and water supply entities have adopted measures to avoid this scenario, and several countries (such as Portugal, Brazil and, in the United States of America, states such as California or Texas) have adopted emergency legislation temporarily prohibiting water supply cuts, since the fight against contracting and spreading COVID-19 is structurally based on

hand washing with water and soap. However, this is a temporary and exceptional solution.

Water supply must be seen once again as a public responsibility: water must remain a public good for social and environmental reasons, and it must be provided as an essential public good. The supply of water to the population for domestic use must be ensured on a permanent basis, without interruptions resulting from non-payment or inadequate bureaucratic-administrative schedules. Several measures ensure this unconditionally: the absolute prohibition of water disconnections for non-payment (in force in several countries, such as Austria and France); the provision of a certain number of cubic metres of water free of charge, based on household size (as in Ecuador); no charge for the water service (as in Northern Ireland). In all of these cases, water service is assumed to be a public service, wholly or partially financed from the State budget, i.e., from national taxes. This is the only way to ensure unconditional access to water for domestic use, and it is not an innovative option, given that it has already been the case in the past – before water metres and the widespread dissemination of water charges – and is also the case today, although in exceptional cases, in some parts of the planet.